

MONOGRAPH SERIES -V

SUICIDES IN RURAL PUNJAB

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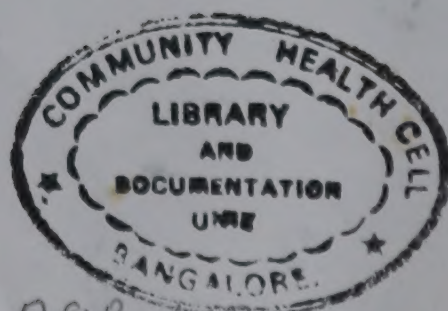
SUICIDES IN RURAL PUNJAB

1998

THE PUNJAB STATE
CO-OP. APEX BANK LTD.
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CO-OPERATION,
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PUNJAB

INSTITUTE FOR DEVELOPMENT AND
COMMUNICATION





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Members of the Expert Group

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SUICIDES IN RURAL PUNJAB

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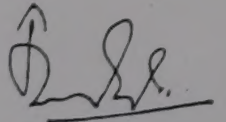
Pramod Kumar, S.L. Sharma

PREFACE

The Study entitled 'Rural Credit and Indebtedness in Punjab' authored by Prof. H.S. Shergill has already documented for the first time in this part of the country the quantum and stratified distribution of the total rural-debt passing for agricultural credit. For quite sometime, many doubting Thomases have been sceptical about the genuineness of the chimerical affluence of the Punjabi farmer. However, there was no reliable data in support of the not-so-happy ground reality. The above cited report has already exploded the myth and, as a consequence, forced various governmental agencies to introspect and redefine their role and responsibility vis-à-vis agricultural sector.

And, then came the spate of deaths reported as suicides of the persons engaged in agriculture including both land-owners and, suprisingly, agricultural workers too. it was against this background that 2nd part of the Study was entrusted to the Institute for Development and Communication to specifically go into the questions of social tensions and economic hardships and their direct/indirect bearing on the reported deaths among the farming community. The Study was also expected to consider the question of financial hardships, distress and depression which might have been occasioned by the repeated crop failures accompanied by the highly un-remunerative returns of the crops. It is a matter of satisfaction that the 2nd part of the Study has comprehensively gone into the intricate matrix of the whys and hows of the deaths in the agricultural sector. Surely, we have to promptly address ourselves to the pertinent

questions raised by the Study, if Punjab is to continue to be the leader producer of the foodgrains in the country.



(J.R. Kundal)

IAS

**Registrar, Cooperative Societies,
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As a sequel to the study on "Rural Indebtedness in Punjab. the Institute was assigned the present study on . "Suicides in Rural Punjab." The purpose of the study was to investigate the nature, extent and causes of suicides in rural Punjab . We were encouraged to Undertake this study by the then Financial Commissioner, Co-operation, Sh. Rajan Kashyap. He also helped us in identification of the main parameters of the study and sources of the data. Sh. K. S. Janjua, present Financial Commissioner, Cooperation also extended full support for which we are thankful to him. The Financial Commissioner, Development, Shri R.N. Gupta provided valuable remedial measures to cope with farmers stress.

The contribution made by the members of the expert group, especially Prof. G.S. Bhalla, renowned agricultural economist and former member planning commission, was of immense value. We are also indebted to Prof. N.N. Wig eminent psychiatrist and Prof. Swaranjit Mehta, population expert, for their valuable support. They generously participated in the field survey and responded to the academic requirements of the project.

We had the privilege to receive numerous letters and telephonic messages from concerned citizens from various parts of Punjab, thanks to a news item about the study published in the leading Punjabi daily Ajit. This as well motivated farmers and agricultural analysts to visit the Institute for personal interactions. We also interacted with Mr. I.S. Jajee, a human rights activist and benefitted from the resource material provided by him.

Prof. A.S. Kalkat, Vice-chancellor, Punjab Agriculture University (PAU) Ludhiana was kind enough to give us the benefit of his thoughts and advice.

Shri J.R. Kundal, Registrar Cooperative Societies Punjab has all along been a source of great inspiration and support. We place on record our deep appreciation for his suggestions on the ways of rationalize rural credit policy to mitigate farmers' distress.

We are extremely thankful to the members of the research team, particularly Mr. Mohinder Kumar, Mr. Manoj Sharma, Mr. Varinder Singh, Mr. Shakeel Ahmad and Ms. Sangeeta who assisted in field work and data collection. Ms Neerja, research fellow, actively assisted the expert group in the administration of psychological tests and their interpretation besides data processing. We acknowledge the support of Mr. Sanjeev Mehta, Mr. Harsh Chopra, Ms. Kamal Sandhu and Mr. Ashwini Kumar, in data processing. We are thankful to all of them.

Most important of all, we are beholden to our respondents from the aggrieved families as well as of the general population without whose cooperation the study would not have been possible.

CO-ORDINATORS

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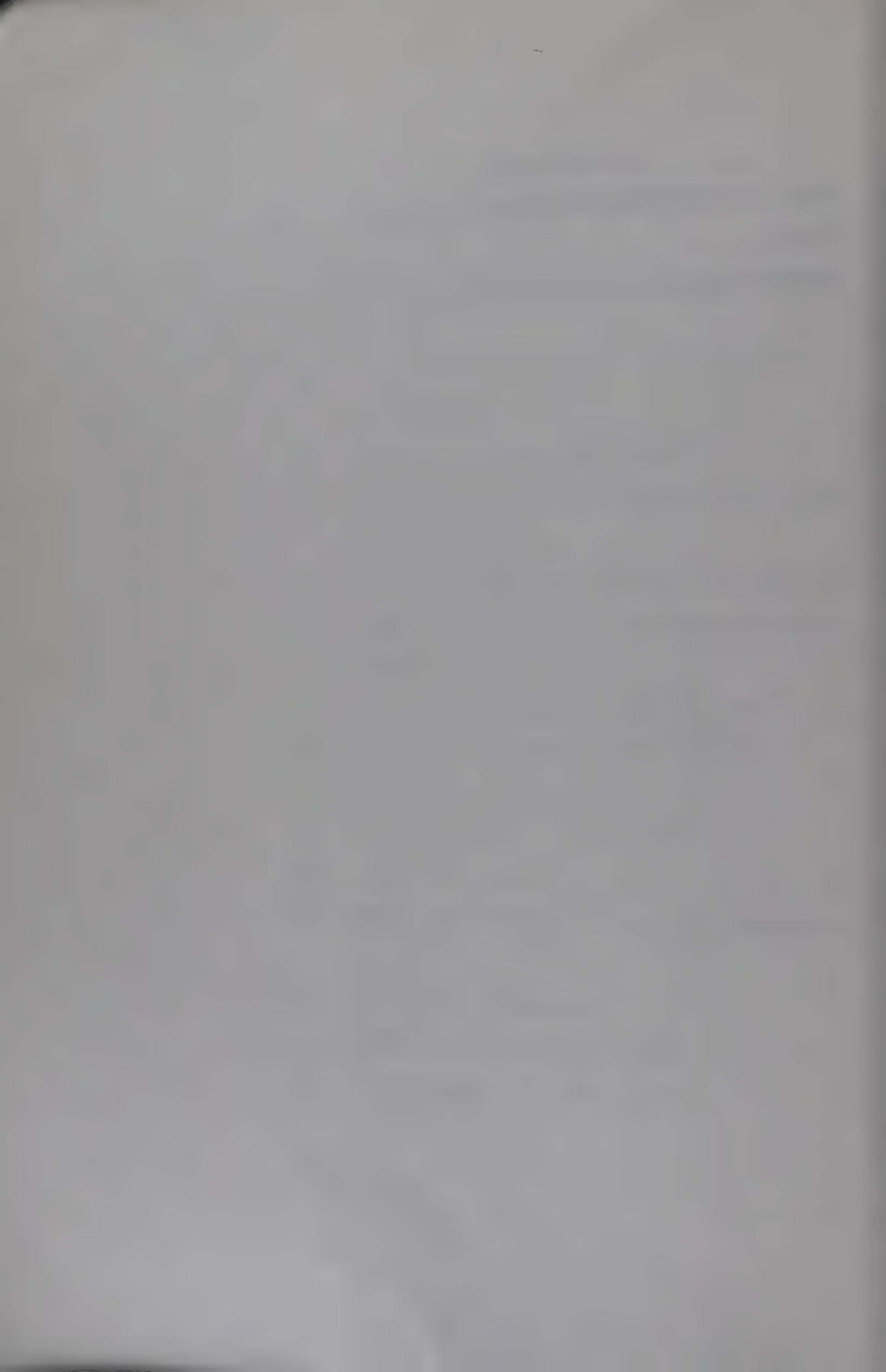
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INTRODUCTION

The current spate of farmers' suicides, highlighted by the media first in Kerala, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh and now in Punjab, is certainly a disturbing phenomenon. What makes this trend all the more worrisome is the reported common cause of such suicides : the burden of debt. While it makes some sense to attribute farmers' suicides in Kerala, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh to indebtedness in view of the widespread poverty there, it appears intriguing in the context of Punjab which is known for its prosperity. For this and various other reasons, the reported spurt in suicides among Punjab farmers is perturbing enough to warrant a serious study.

There have appeared several journalistic accounts about the incidence and causes of farmers' suicides in Punjab, but they vary enormously in their estimates and explanations. The issue has also acquired political overtones leading to allegations of exaggeration as well as under-estimation. Hence the need for an objective and systematic study of the incidence and causes of suicides in rural Punjab.

From a sociological angle, it is important to distinguish between suicide as personal trouble and suicide as a public issue. So long as suicide remains an occasional and isolated occurrence by certain individuals here and there it stays put at the level of personal trouble. When the incidence shows an upward trend affecting one or the other section of society it becomes a public issue. In the present case, suicides among Punjab farmers have by all means become a public issue as these are no longer confined to isolated cases. These have acquired alarming proportions, and for this very reason call for a systematic study.

PERSPECTIVES

There have appeared two major perspectives on suicide in existing literature: psychological and sociological. The concepts and causes of suicide vary with these perspectives. Viewing suicide as an intensely personal act of self-destruction, the psychological perspective highlights the role of the psychopathic state in explaining suicides. With the rise of psycho-analysis, led by Sigmund Freud, a new conception of suicide emerged, i.e., suicide as an act of aggression against society turned inward. Freud attributed it to "*unconscious*" drives. While the Freudian conception of suicide remains debatable, emergence of the discipline of psychiatry as a therapeutic orientation has further extended our knowledge about suicide. Treating suicide as a highly individualistic act, the psychiatric approach brings in sharp focus the role of mental illness, alcoholism, drug addiction and mental stress.

The sociological perspective is advanced by Emile Durkheim, a renowned French sociologist and father of scientific sociology, and is built upon the systematic negation of all explanations, including psychological in the main, which ascribe suicide to extra-social factors, such as mental alienation, etc. Reviewing the then prevailing psychological explanations, he observes, "Thus the psychopathic state bears a regular and indisputable relation to suicide. A society does not depend for its number of suicides upon having more or fewer neuropaths or alcoholics (1952:81). Unlike the psychological conception, Durkheim defines suicide not as a personal act but as a social fact and insists on locating the causes

suicide not in the psyche of the individual but "*out there*" in the social structural factors. He distinguished three forms of suicides, namely, egoistic, altruistic and anomic and explains them in terms of social aetiology. In particular, he identifies two main attributes of social structure, i.e., the degree of group integration and the state of moral constitution, as "*social concomitants*" of suicide and maintains that these are inversely related to the suicide rate. Egoistic suicide, according to Durkheim, results from lack of integration of the individual into society. He cites examples from three fields i.e., religious groups, the family and national communities. In respect of religious groups, he observes that the rate of suicide is low among Catholics, the followers of a faith which is known for closer integration of individuals into collective life, and high among Protestants who are known for their individualism. With respect to the family, similarly, Durkheim finds a high rate of egoistic suicide where there is weak integration of individual into the family. Accordingly, he hypothesizes : the greater the density of family the greater the immunity of individuals to suicide. In political and national communities, again, Durkheim discovers the same inverse relationship between the degree of integration and the rate of suicide. For the same reason, he contends that the rate of suicide falls in times of national crisis while it rises in normal (peaceful) times.

Egoistic suicide results from inadequate integration of the individual into society, altruistic suicide results from his over-integration into the community. It occurs where the individual over-identifies himself with the group, so much so that he acts on

group commandments unthinkingly. The sacrifice of life soldier for the honour of his unit or for that of the nation example of altruistic suicide.

Anomic suicide, on the other hand, results from lack of regulation of the individual by society. Anomie is a state of normlessness, a decline in the regulatory power of social norms. A situation of sudden prosperity or sudden bankruptcy represents an anomie which may prompt anomic suicide. The same type of situation may occur in marriage which Durkheim calls conjugal anomie, as exemplified by divorce, and it also tends to stimulate suicide. In short, Durkheim maintains that there are suicidal waves or currents which sweep vulnerable individuals, those rendered vulnerable by the conditions of social structure specified above.

As enlightening as they are, the two perspectives outlined above represent two extreme positions. The psychological perspective tends to overstress psychological factors while the sociological perspective tends to overstress social factors. Each suffers from an exclusivist bias, an error of monopolist orientation. Individual and society are not as exclusive to each other as postulated in the two perspectives. In empirical reality, what we have is an individual in society as well as society in an individual. The two cannot be understood in isolation from each other. In view of this, the phenomenon of suicide can best be explained in terms of interaction between psychological and social factors rather than in terms of overemphasis on one to the neglect of the other. This calls for a reconciliation of the two perspectives. We will, therefore, use the two perspectives in our study as complementary rather than competitive.

and try to understand the phenomenon of suicide by exploring the interconnections of the two. We may as well go beyond them in forging a linkage between the two by focusing on the stresses and strains generated by some of contemporary social processes over and above the structural attributes.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To find out if there has been an increase in the incidence of suicide, particularly farmers' suicide, in recent years in Punjab, or in any particular region of the state.
2. To identify the distinctive socio-economic characteristics of the cases of suicide
3. To explore both predisposing and precipitating factors that lead to suicide.
4. To find out the relationship between indebtedness and suicide.
5. To ascertain the level of peoples' awareness of the problem and to suggest ways and means to reduce the incidence of suicide to the minimum possible.

METHODOLOGY

In accord with its objectives, the study was conducted in rural Punjab. The data have been drawn from both the sources : primary and secondary. Primary data have been generated through field work while secondary from the available documents. The main sources of secondary data are as follows :

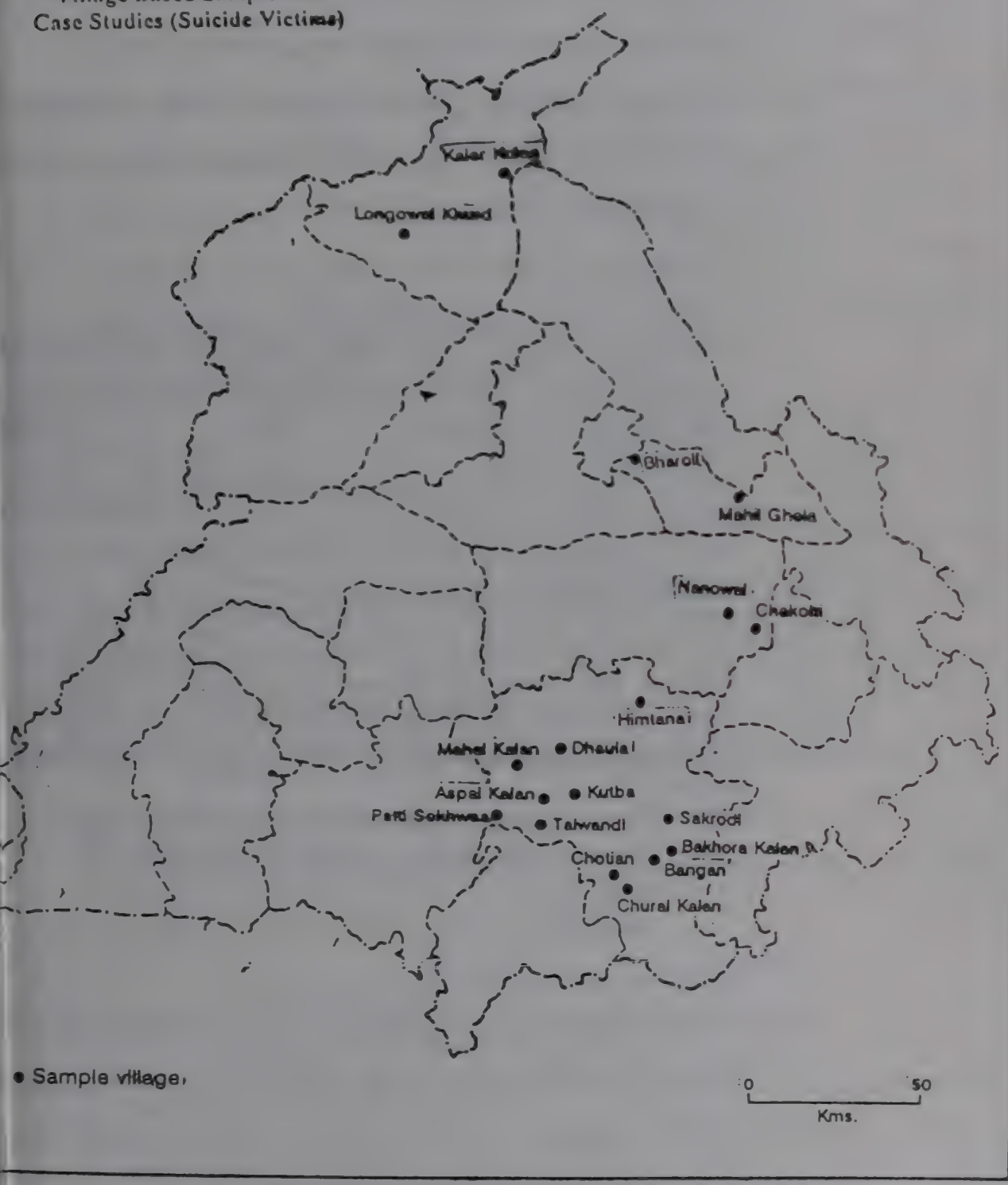
- Census of India, 1991
- National Crime Records Bureau, 1995

- National Sample Survey, 1989
- Economic and Statistical Organisation, Punjab
- Statistical Abstracts, Punjab
- Punjab Police statistics
- Reports of the Movement Against State Repression
- Newspaper reports on farmers' suicide

On the basis of information gathered from the above sources, a macro context was developed which located Punjab on the all-India scene of suicides and their causes; identified the levels of prevalence of various districts of Punjab, examined the trends in overall mortality rates vis-à-vis suicide rates; and village level variations in the levels of mortality rates, etc. This information helped us to draw a representative sample to serve as a comparison group, and also to select suicide cases for generating primary data, apart from the other uses that we have made of it.

Primary data for the report have been collected from an in-depth study of 53 cases of confirmed suicides drawn from 14 villages. A sample survey of 119 general households drawn from six villages with high mortality rate, qualitative analysis of 28 cases of suicides. To begin with, an extensive survey of 135 cases was conducted from the available lists of the cases of farmers' suicide reported by various agencies. Out of these, 53 cases of suicide were intensively studied. These came from 14 villages where maximum cases were reported in recent years i.e. Longowal Khurd, Chakohi, Maheela Kalan, Dhaula, Aspal Kalan, Kutba, Patti Sekhwaa, Talwar, Sakrodi, Bakhora Kalan, Chotian, Bangan, Chural Kalan, and Maheela Ghela.

PUNJAB
Village Based Sample and
Case Studies (Suicide Victims)



The data about these 53 cases were drawn from their close relatives, more than 80 per cent of whom were first degree relatives such as father (26 per cent), brother (20 per cent), mother (14 per cent), wife (12 per cent) and son (10 per cent).

For the purpose of having a comparison group, a representative sample was drawn from among the villages with a mortality rate higher than that of the district.

Table - 1.1
PERCENTAGE OF VILLAGES ABOVE THE RURAL MORTALITY RATE IN SELECTED DISTRICTS

	Gurdaspur		Sangrur		Mansa		Ludhiana	
Year	^(1)	^(2)	^(1)	^(2)	^(1)	^(2)	^(1)	^(2)
1990	18.16	45.78	11.06	50.69	19.07	47.91	*	*
1991	14.84	47.14	31.45	42.73	19.34	47.64	*	*
1992	18.13	37.56	13.53	50.46	18.61	42.86	*	*
1993	17.59	47.44	28.66	48.06	22.27	49.76	*	*
1994	17.65	36.34	14.74	48.08	21.78	42.08	23.61	52.1
1995	14.55	49.69	15.89	50.99	27.57	32.24	22.83	49.1
1996	16.96	38.34	15.08	51.19	19.78	39.56	23.08	46.1
1997	15.74	36.25	16.00	54.86	25.00	48.30	23.39	50.1

SOURCE: PUNJAB POLICE STATISTICS

^(1) % age of villages above Punjab rural mortality rate
 ^(2) % age of villages above district rural mortality rate
 * Data not available

In all, three villages from Malwa i.e. Himtana (Sangrur), Nanok and Chakohi (Ludhiana), two from Majha i.e. Longowal Khurd and Kaler Kalan (Gurdaspur) and two from Doaba i.e. Mahil Ghela and Bharoli (Nawanshehar) were selected based on the above criteria. 20 households each from the three villages of Malwa and 15 each from the four villages of Majha and Doaba were drawn following the random sample procedure. One of the selected households

refrused to oblige. In its final form, the sample comprised 119 households as representatives of the general population of the high mortality areas.

Qualitative data were collected in respect of 28 cases of suicide drawn from four villages, namely, Bangan, Ballaran, Chotian and Sakrodi, all the four having the dubious distinction of being in the news about farmers' suicide. Systematic case studies of these cases were prepared and these were used for analytical purposes.

Wayside group interviews, mostly informal, were conducted by members of the expert team in order to have a feel of the field. These yielded a rich insight into the peoples' perception of the problem of suicide, its causes and remedies.

RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS

The data were collected by means of the following research questionnaire which were carefully designed, pre-tested and standardized :

- Village survey schedule
- Interview schedule for close kin of the suicide victims
- Interview schedule for general sample survey

In addition to the above, the following available instruments were also used.

- PGI N-2 questionnaire (Verma and Wig, 1976)
- Suicide intent test (Gupta, Anand and Trivedi, 1983)

The village schedule was used to collect general information about the village, including social structure, economic position, health and educational status, and power structure. The interview

schedule for close kins of suicide victims was designed to obtain information on the socio-economic profile of the suicide victims, factors responsible for their suicide, and causes of the suicide as perceived by the respondents as also the effects of the suicide on their families. The schedule for the general sample was constructed to gather comparative information about the presence or absence of the factors believed to be associated with the phenomenon of suicide and suicide proneness of the respondents.

PGI N-2 questionnaire (Verma and Wig, 1976)

The necessity of getting an accurate idea of physical and mental health level of the respondents was felt during the initial investigations. For this purpose PGI Mental Health Questionnaire was applied. The test contains 50 items covering psychological as well as physical dimensions. Ten items of the scale were added to detect the aspect of social desirability. It is standardized and designed to assess mental and physical health of the subjects. Over the years this test has been used widely in field setting, community work and has been found to be a useful index of psychological ill-health. The test has certain definite advantages such as :

1. It is a short, simple test.
2. It can be used with illiterate, unsophisticated population also.
3. It is medically oriented.
4. It has high internal consistency, reliability and validity.
5. It has high discriminatory power to separate the psychiatric population from the normal group.

Suicide intent questionnaire

This questionnaire is an attempt to investigate suicidal intent. It is helpful in discriminating suicidal and non-suicidal people and is also easy to administer. This test is considered a clinically reliable tool to elicit suicidal indication. Ten statements of the suicidal intent were administered to the people. Besides other psychometric qualities, this test enjoys high predictive validity.

FIELD WORK

Fieldwork was carried out during the months of June and July, 98, by a group of trained investigators with background of social sciences and psychology under the supervision of a team of experts. The experts paid visits to the field individually as well as jointly to reinforce the quality of the work of the investigators and to capture qualitative information about the problem under study.

Interviewing was used as the main technique of data collection both by the investigators and members of the expert team. As any experienced field worker would understand, a one-to-one interview is often not practical in the village setting and many a time more than one family member would add to the information. Our field experience was no exception to it.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data thus collected have been analyzed in an objective manner by following the principle of statistical reasoning as well as qualitative interpretation. Statistical tests like chi square and Z test have been used to bring out the differential characteristics of the

suicide victims vis-à-vis respondents comprising general sa
Charts, graphs and other illustrative material have been u
convey the message of the data in a graphic manner. For pu
of qualitative analysis, case studies and narratives o
respondents have been extensively used.

LIMITATIONS

It of course is never very easy to get at the objective reality b
the present study it was even more difficult because of the h
subjective nature of the problem of the study and the su
victims being no more there to be examined or interviewed. U
the circumstances we had to resort not only to cross checki
information with various sources but also to what has some
been called "psychological autopsy"¹ — a technique use
meticulously collect from the family members all the ava
information about the circumstances leading to the desperat
This method has obvious limitations : a time gap leading to me
lapse, motivated reporting by the relatives, suspicious orientati
the family members about the inquiry and reluctance of the f
to let out the facts of the case. These limitations notwithstan
we have done our best to ensure the reliability of the informati
well as its quality by establishing proper rapport with
respondents and by explaining to them the purpose of the inqu

¹ Psychological autopsy is a technology developed by the Los Angeles Preven
Centre. It is a source of information about the deceased, which reveals the
psychological data often necessary for deducting whether a given case is a su
an accident or a homicide (Satyavathi, 1986)

SECTION II

TRENDS OF SUICIDES IN INDIA AND PUNJAB

There is only limited literature available on an in-depth analysis of the nature and incidence of suicide in Punjab, particularly in terms of regional and strata-wise variations. Therefore, in this section, an attempt has been made to capture the suicide trends in Punjab in relation to other states of India. An analysis of suicides across time has been attempted to find out whether there is an increase or decrease in the rate of suicide along seasonal, regional and cultural lines.

A comparative analysis of the data shows that the suicide rate is steadily increasing all over India and Punjab is no exception to this general trend. The data show that in India in the year 1985, the suicide rate per lakh population was 7.0; it increased to 8.9 in 1990 and 9.7 in 1995.

Table 2.1
STATES WITH HIGH SUICIDE RATE

ALL-INDIA (RATE)*					
1993		1994		1995	
(9.5)		(9.9)		(9.7)	
States					
1.	Kerala	(27.0)	1.	Kerala	(28.0)
2.	Tripura	(18.7)	2.	Karnataka	(19.1)
3.	Karnataka	(17.3)	3.	Goa	(19.0)
4.	Goa	(16.6)	4.	Tripura	(17.4)
5.	West Bengal	(15.1)	5.	West Bengal	(17.2)
6.	Tamil Nadu	(13.8)	6.	Tamil Nadu	(16.0)
7.	Maharashtra	(12.5)	7.	Maharashtra	(12.8)
8.	Andhra Pradesh	(11.3)	8.	Sikkim	(12.7)
9.	Sikkim	(10.9)	9.	Assam	(10.6)
10.	Assam	(10.8)	10.	Andhra Pradesh	(10.3)
11.	Orissa	(10.1)			

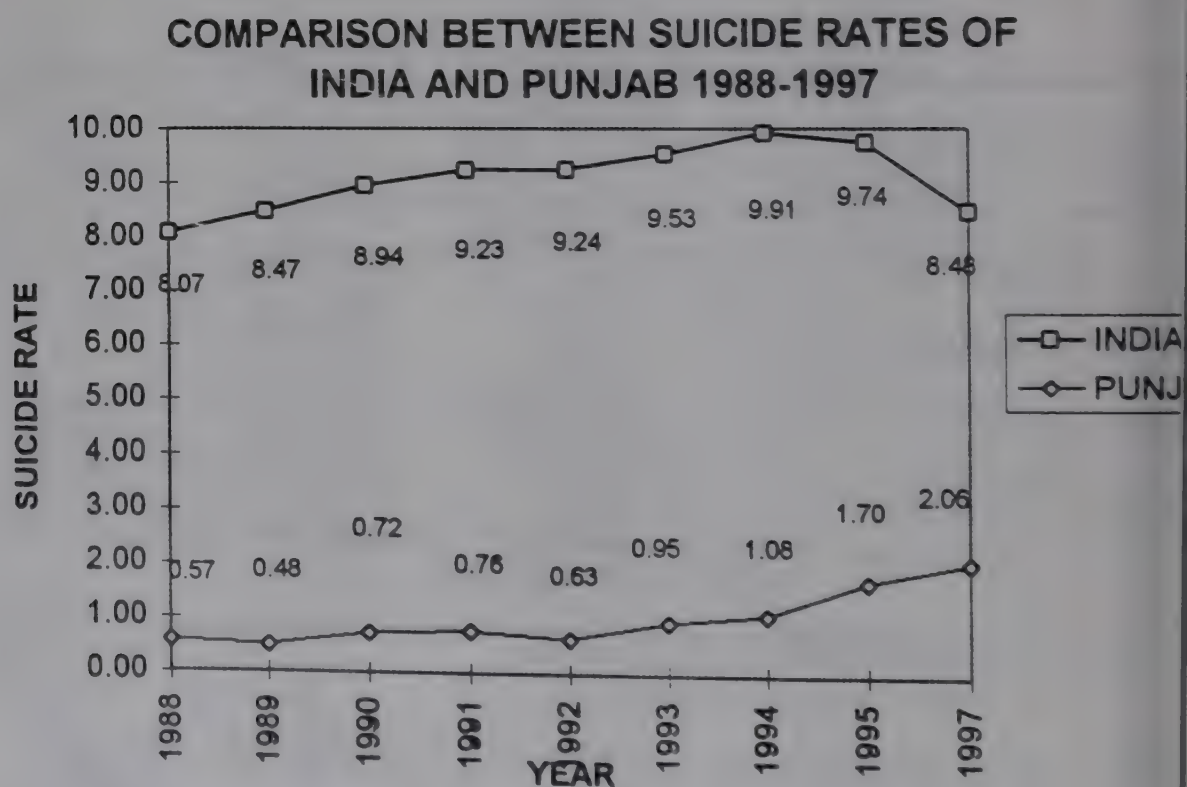
Source:- National Crime Recording Bureau
(N.C.R.B) 1995 * per lakh population

The major share of this increase in the suicide rate goes to Kerala, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Tripura, Goa, West Bengal, Maharashtra, Madhya

Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh. During 1995, Kerala registered the highest suicide rate i.e. 29.9 followed by Karnataka (23.4), Tripura (19.0), Goa (19.3), West Bengal (17.0), Tamil Nadu (15.0), Maharashtra (13.8), Sikkim (12.9), Haryana (10.3).

The incidence of suicide rose in India by 68.88 per cent in the decade 1985-95. All-India comparisons show that Punjab is not highly suicide prone. According to 1995 suicide rate figures, Punjab ranked eighteenth. This shows that the problem of suicide is not very serious in Punjab as compared with other states of India. (see chart below). This suicide rate in India was 8.07 in 1988 which increased to 9.91 in 1994 and thereafter it declined to 8.48 in 1997. However, in Punjab, the suicide rate was 0.57 in 1988 which increased to 1.08 in 1994 and thereafter it continued to increase like the overall trend in India.

Graph -2.1



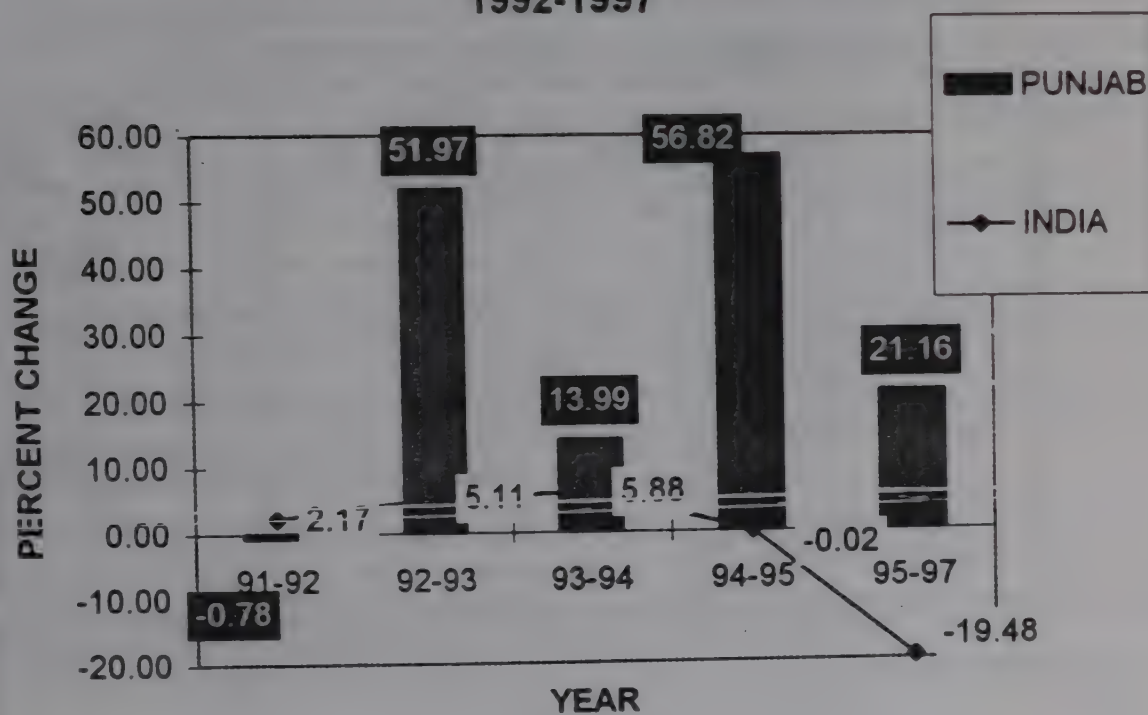
SUICIDE TRENDS IN PUNJAB

Sharp increase in suicide rate

An in-depth analysis of the disaggregate data on Punjab shows disturbing trends. There has been a distinct increase in the number of suicides in Punjab since 1993. In 1992-93 suicides in Punjab increased by 51.97 per cent. By contrast, the all-India average registered an increase of 5.11 per cent only. In subsequent years, this trend has continued. In 1993-94, there was an increase of 14 per cent, whereas in India it was 5.88 per cent. In 1994-95, the increase in the case of Punjab was 57 per cent whereas in India as a whole there was a decline in suicides.

Graph -2.2

NUMBER OF SUICIDES: A COMPARATIVE PICTURE OF INDIA AND PUNJAB 1992-1997



In 1995-97*, the increase in the suicides in Punjab was to the extent of 21 per cent, whereas the decline in India to the extent of 19 per cent. (Graph 2.2). It is a matter of concern that the number of suicides per lakh population (i.e. suicide rate) has been steadily increasing from 0.57 in 1988 to 2.06 in 1997.

(ii) Increase in suicides in stages corresponding to social turmoil

In fact, this increase in suicide rate in Punjab has been in stages. The data reflect that between the period 1988-91 the increase was nominal, in the year 1991-92 the increase was moderate, whereas there was a steep increase from 1993 onwards which broadly coincided with the post-terrorism phase.

Table - 2.2
YEAR WISE SUICIDE RATE OF INDIA AND PUNJAB
AND NUMBER OF SUICIDES IN PUNJAB

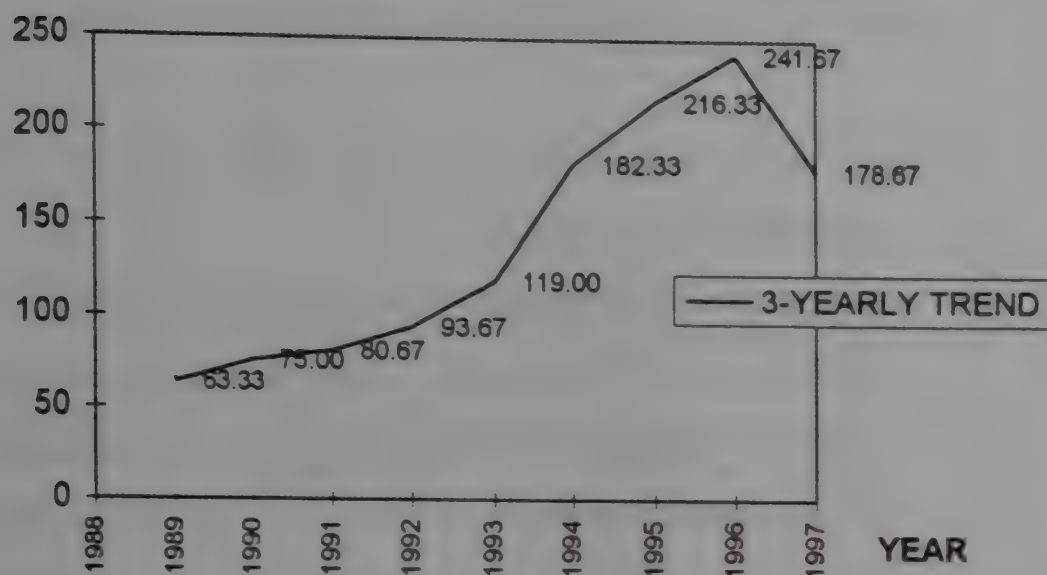
	Punjab		India
	No. of suicides ¹	Suicide rate*	Suicide rate ²
1988	95	0.57	8.07
1989	81	0.48	8.47
1990	121	0.72	8.94
1991	128	0.76	9.23
1992	127	0.63	9.24
1993	193	0.95	9.53
1994	220	1.08	9.91
1995	345	1.70	9.74
1996	349	1.72	—
1997	418	2.06	8.48

Source : (1) Punjab Police Statistics (2) N.C.R.B. M.H.A. (*) per lakh population

* Data for 1996 are not available
* Data for 1996 are not available

Graph - 2.3

GENERAL SUICIDE TREND IN PUNJAB : 1988-1997



To illustrate, in post-1992 phase a number of villages in Sangrur district experienced a spurt in suicides. For example, villages like Bangan registered 11, Bakhoran Kalan 6, Chural Kalan 7, Mahal Kalan 8 suicide case, whereas these villages had seen no suicide in the past years preceding 1992.

The field study also reinforced a similar trend. Out of the total 53 cases, 17 per cent occurred in the first five years i.e. 1988-93 and 83 per cent during the years 1994-98.

The hypothesis that the incidence of suicide decreased at the time of social turmoil and increased with the restoration of social peace and stability, needs in-depth investigation. For instance, similar trends were noticed in Denmark and the United Kingdom. In these countries immediately after the war there was an increase in the hospitalization of cases of attempted suicides.

Another noticeable fact is that there is a decline in suicide trend in 1997 as shown in three yearly moving averages. Some of the respondents opined that this might be due to the emergence of a political consensus on issues relating to agrarian transformation and also due to various populist measures like free electricity and water implemented by governments.

SUICIDES IN PUNJAB : DISAGGREGATE ANALYSIS

(i) Sectoral and localized

The geo-cultural spread of incidence of suicides in Punjab clearly reflects these to be located in the Malwa districts (specifically the districts of Sangrur, Bathinda, Firozpur, Mansa, and Faridkot) and in the border districts of Amritsar and Gurdaspur. In fact the percentage share of six districts of Sangrur, Bathinda, Mansa, Amritsar, Firozpur and Gurdaspur constitutes more than 72 per cent of the total suicides in Punjab from 1988 to 1997. Interestingly, Hoshiarpur in the Doaba region ranked fourth in terms of suicide rates and accounted for more than 10 per cent of the total suicides in the state (see Table 2.3).

The other districts of Doaba comprising Kapurthala and Jalandhara including Nawanshahr did not reflect a similar proneness to suicides. Such distribution of suicides with a marked concentration in six of the 17 districts of Punjab clearly reflects that suicide is not an ubiquitous phenomenon in Punjab. Rather it is restricted to pockets. Moreover, certain districts such as Sangrur, Bathinda, Mansa, Hoshiarpur, Firozpur and Faridkot have experienced higher suicide rates when compared with the state average.

Table - 2.3
PUNJAB : AVERAGE SUICIDE RATE, PERCENTAGE SHARE
OF
THE DISTRICTS 1988-1997

Districts	Suicide rate	Rank	% share
Sangrur	2.74	1	22.39
Bathinda	2.69	2	11.88
Mansa	2.42	3	6.42
Hoshiarpur	1.77	4	10.16
Firozepur	1.42	5	10.38
Faridkot	1.08	6	2.24
Gurdaspur	1.03	7	9.19
Amritsar	1.03	8	12.14
Muktsar	0.72	9	2.11
Nawanshahr	0.70	10	1.89
Ludhiana	0.58	11	6.64
Kapurthala	0.37	12	1.01
Patiala	0.22	13	1.50
Rupnagar	0.21	14	0.84
Moga	0.18	15	0.48
Jalandhar	0.09	16	0.70
Fateh garh sahib	0.00	17	0.00
Punjab	1.07		100.00

Source :- Punjab Police Statistics

not only has there been a spurt in suicides during post-1992 period but many suicides have also been localized to specific areas and villages.

(i) Cultivator farmers' suicides in Punjab

(a) Percentage share of cultivator farmers' suicides

There is a widespread belief that there has been a spate of cultivator farmers' suicides in Punjab. The macro data show that the percentage share of cultivator farmers' suicides to the total suicides in the state between 1991-97 is to the extent of 23 per cent. In Sangrur district, the percentage share of cultivator farmers to the total suicides in the district is to the extent of 50 per cent (see Table 2.4). The other district which has a higher percentage share of

cultivator farmers suicides as compared with the Punjab average (23.18) is Bathinda (25.71)

Table -2.4
PUNJAB DISTRICT-WISE SUICIDE RATE, RANK AND
PER CENT SHARE OF CULTIVATOR FARMERS' SUICIDES

Districts	Suicide Rate	% of cultivator farmers' suicides to the total suicides	Rank on the basis of suicide rate
Sangrur	12.08	50.00	1
Bathinda	6.24	25.71	2
Ferozepur	2.99	21.24	3
Mansa	2.79	13.71	4
Faridkot	2.53	23.08	5
Amritsar	2.42	17.12	6
Gurdaspur	2.26	14.38	7
Ludhiana	1.91	16.81	8
Hoshiarpur	1.78	6.60	9
Nawanshahr	1.59	16.22	10
Muktsar	1.14	14.63	11
Jalandhar	0.43	20.00	12
Patiala	0.22	7.14	13
Rupnagar	0.19	7.69	14
Kapurthala	0.00	0.00	15
Moga	0.00	0.00	16
Fateh garh Sahib	0.00	0.00	17
Punjab	3.17	23.18	

Source:- Punjab Police Statistics

These are the only two districts which have such a high share of cultivator farmers' suicide.

(b) Comparison of suicide rates between cultivators farmers and non-cultivators

It is interesting to note that the suicide rate of cultivator farmer compared with non-cultivators presents an entirely different scenario. The percentage share of cultivator farmers to the non-cultivators suicide is low in all districts except Sangrur.

PUNJAB
Farmers Suicide Proneness Districts
1991-97



However, the suicide rate of cultivator farmers as compared with non-cultivators is very high. For instance, suicide rate of cultivator farmers in 1993 was 1.98 and that of non-cultivators, 0.90. In the year 1997, the suicide rate of cultivator farmers was 4.49 and of the non-cultivators 1.82.

Another important feature which emerges from the analysis is that there is an increase in the suicide rate of cultivator farmers as compared with non-cultivators. In the year 1988, the overall suicide rate was 0.57 and the cultivator farmers suicide rate was 1.81.

Table - 2.5
NUMBER OF SUICIDES AND SUICIDE RATES FOR CULTIVATOR FARMERS , NON-CULTIVATORS AND TOTAL POPULATION OF PUNJAB 1988-1997

	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997
<u>Cultivator farmers</u>										
No. of suicides	32	25	39	24	41	37	57	86	86	84
Suicide rate	1.81	1.41	2.21	1.28	2.19	1.98	3.05	4.60	4.60	4.49
<u>Non-cultivators</u>										
No. of suicides	63	56	82	104	86	156	163	259	263	334
Suicide rate	0.42	0.37	0.55	0.57	0.47	0.90	0.89	1.41	1.43	1.82
<u>Total population</u>										
No. of suicides	95	81	121	128	127	193	220	345	349	418
Suicide rate	0.57	0.48	0.72	0.76	0.63	0.95	1.08	1.70	1.72	2.06

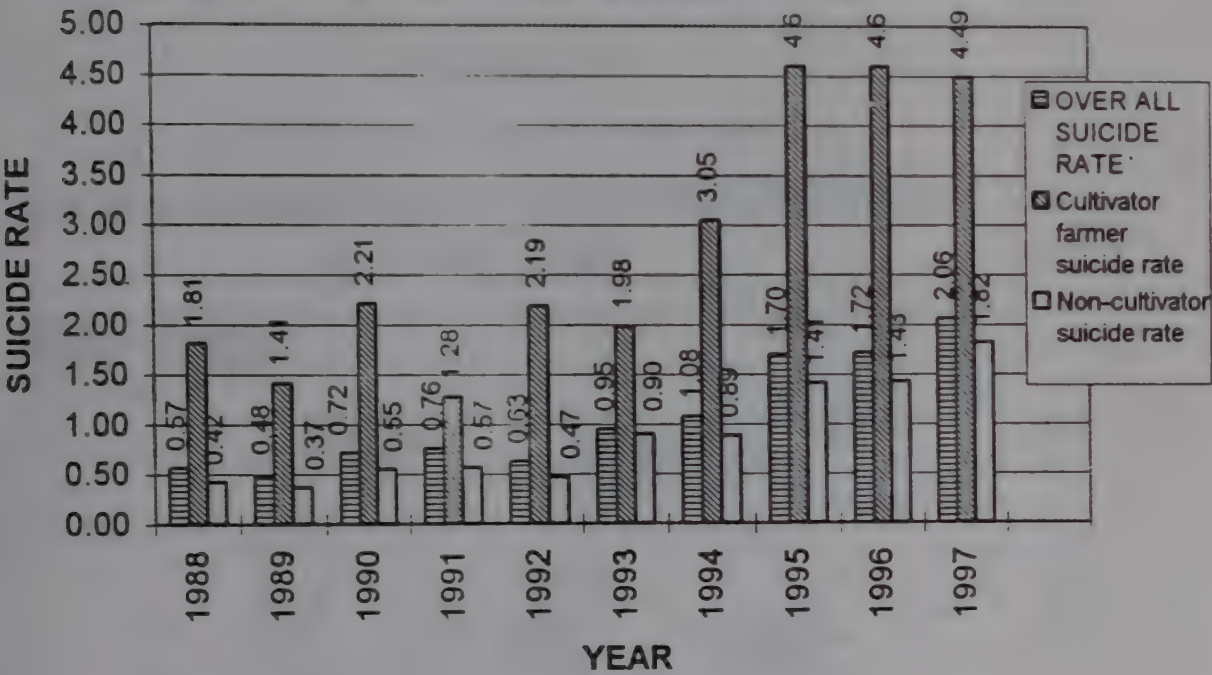
Source: Punjab Police Statistics

The non-cultivators' suicide rate was 0.42. The suicide rate of cultivator farmers increased to 2.19 in the year 1992, whereas in the case of non-cultivators the rate was 0.47. In 1994, the overall suicide rate in Punjab was 1.08 and the cultivator farmers' rate had increased to 3.05. The non-cultivators' suicide rate also increased nominally to 0.85.

The cultivator farmers' suicide rate however, increased substantially to 4.55 in the year 1997. The overall suicide rate in that year was 2.06. This clearly shows that the rate of suicides of cultivators farmers is high in Punjab.

The share of cultivator farmers' suicides in the districts bordering Haryana i.e. *Sangrur, Bathinda, Mansa* was to the extent of 61 per cent between 1991-97.

Graph 2.4
PUNJAB : SUICIDE RATES FOR CULTIVATOR FARMERS,
NON - CULTIVATOR AND TOTAL POPULATION



However, the districts along the international border i.e. Amritsar, Firozpur and Gurdaspur, have 25 per cent share of the cultivators farmers' suicides. Together these two zones have witnessed more than 85 per cent of the total cultivator farmers' suicides in the state, whereas these districts account for around 45 per cent of the population of Punjab.

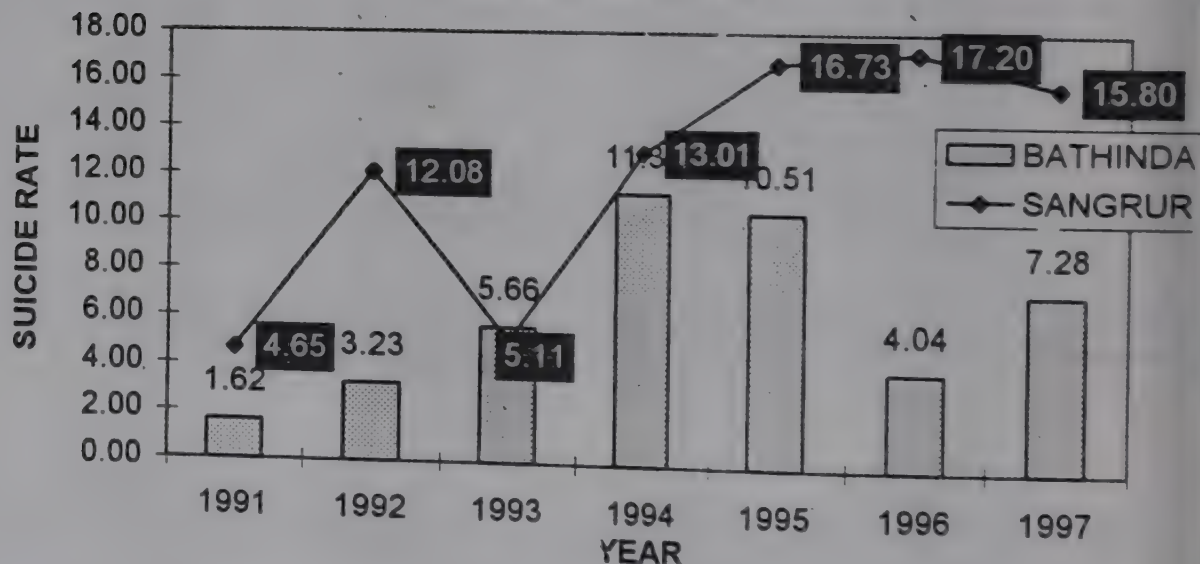
Table - 2.6
LEVEL OF SUICIDES PRONENESS AMONG CULTIVATOR
FARMERS IN
DISTRICTS OF PUNJAB 1991-1997

High	Moderate	Low
1. Sangrur	1. Mansa	1. Fatehgarh sahib
2. Bathinda	2. Amritsar	2. Nawanshehr
	3. Firozpur	3. Jalandhar
	4. Gurdaspur	4. Kapurthala
	5. Faridkot	5. Ludhiana
		6. Muktsar
		7. Moga
		8. Rupnagar
		9. Patiala
		10. Hoshiarpur

Source:- Punjab Police Statistics, 1998

Graph -2.5

**DISTRICTS WITH HIGH PRONENESS TO SUICIDE :
TREND 1991-1997**



The districts with a high proneness to cultivator farmers' suicide in Punjab are Sangrur and Bathinda with suicide rates of 12.08 and 6.24 respectively. The moderate districts in this respect are Firozpur, Mansa, Faridkot, Amritsar and Gurdaspur. It is disturbing that Sangrur has registered such a high suicide rate i.e. 12.08 and has a share of 44 per

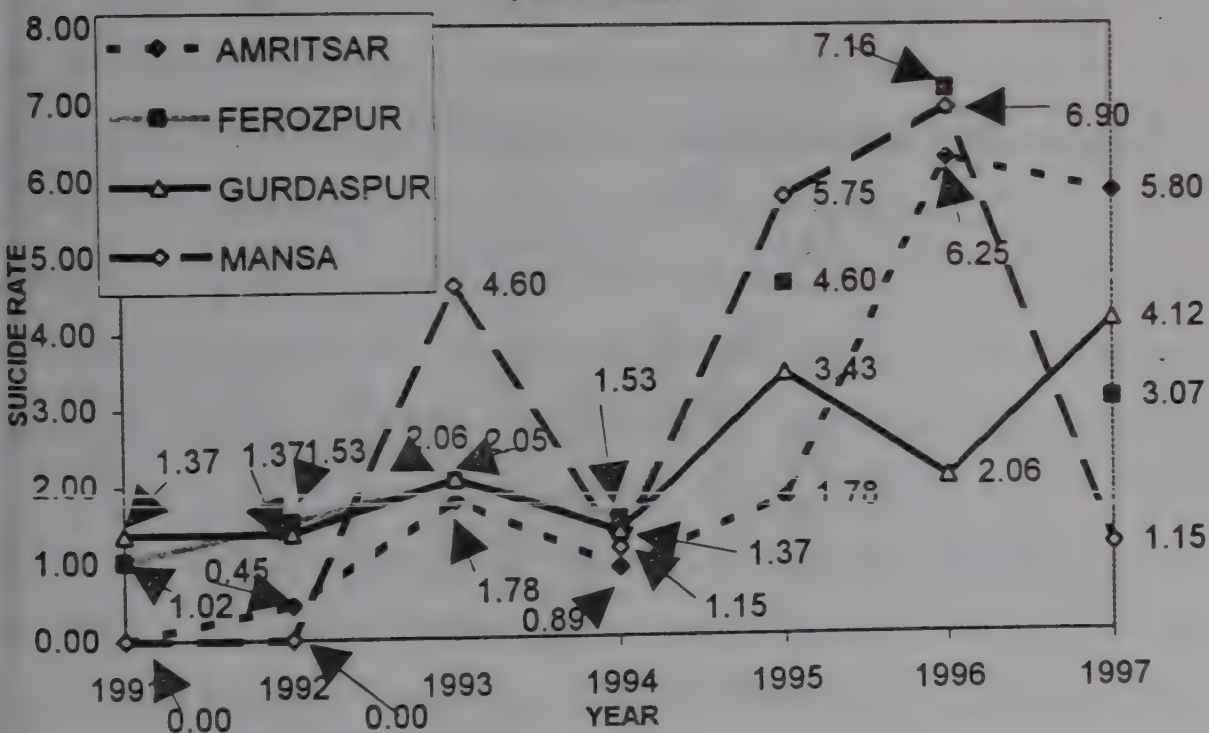
of the total suicides in the state between 1991-97. Similarly ,
 Chhinda has also registered a high suicide rate of 6.24 and its share of
 al suicides is about 13 per cent in the same period. These two districts
 ve shared more than half the total suicides in the state. It is interesting
 at the share of non-cultivators' suicides in these districts is also high as
 mpared with other districts i.e. 13.24 per cent and 11.35 per cent
 spectively.

i) Multi causality of suicides

Many analysts have reported that there has been spate of suicides
 because of crop failures or crop damage.

Graph -2.6

SUICIDE RATES IN DISTRICTS HAVING MODERATE LEVEL OF SUICIDE PRONENESS 1991-1997



There are a number of ways through which this proposition can be verified. An analysis of causes and factors leading to each suicide with the help of case study method has been used.

The findings suggest that there are multiple causes and factors resulting suicides. (See Section VI) Another method used was to capture district-wise yearly spread of suicides. It was noticed that there was yearly inconsistency in the suicide rates in districts.

The districts i.e. Sangrur and Bathinda which are highly prone to suicides have registered an increase in the suicide rate in 1994 (Graph 2.5). Whereas, the districts with moderate level of suicides like Mansa, Firozpur, Gurdaspur experienced a low suicide rate in the same year (Graph 2.6).

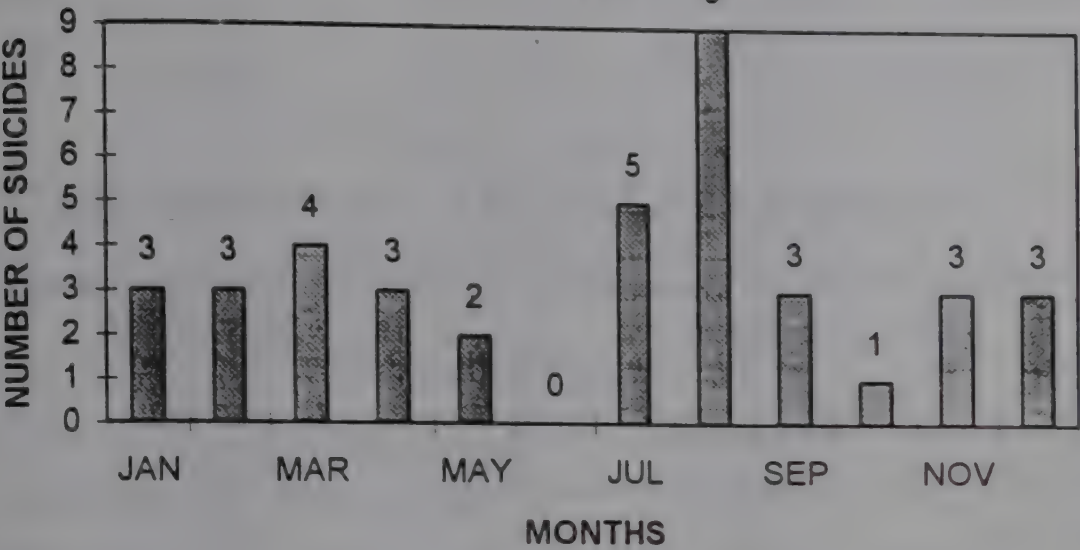
Another method adopted was to find out months in which maximum suicides are concentrated. This has also helped to find out, whether there was a spate of suicides in a particular month in response to failure of crop or in examination or any other time specific reason. For instance, in Mansa district, a total of 39 suicides were reported between 1990-97. A quick glance at the data reveals that the incidence of suicide was spread over all the months. June was the only month which reported no suicide, whereas August reported a total of nine. Spread of suicide in all the months is also reflected from the sample data. (Graph 2.7)

Monthly spread of suicide in Punjab in a ten-year span of 1988-98 reflects the suicides to be well dispersed throughout the whole year. April and June accounted for the higher suicides incidence, whereas January and December had the lowest number of suicides (Graph 2.8). Therefore, it can be hypothesized that it would be difficult to attribute macro causal explanations to suicides like crop or examination failure etc. But a

background and context having general explanations may provide an insight into the farmers' distress.

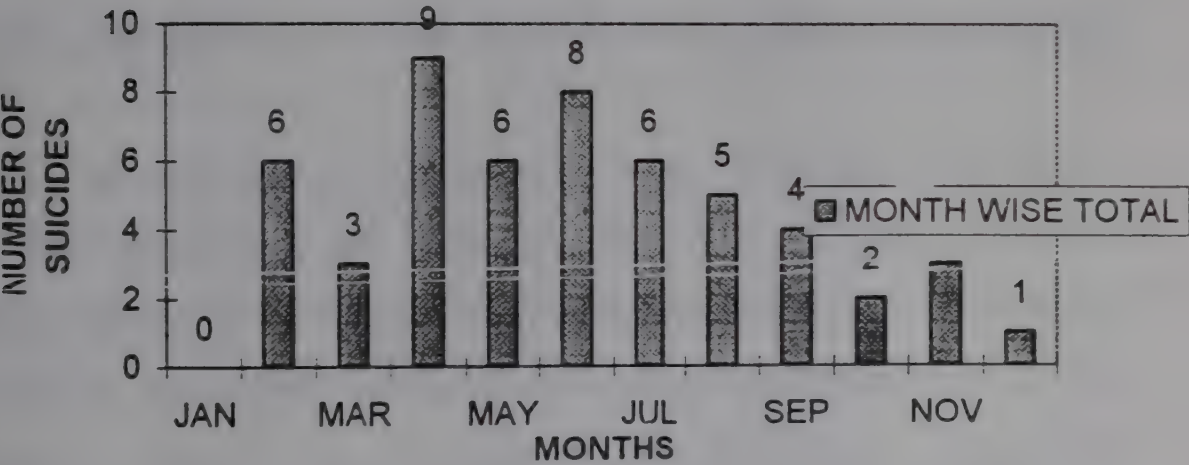
Graph 2.7

MONTHLY SPREAD OF SUICIDES IN MANSA 1990-1997



Graph 2.8

MONTHLY SPREAD OF SUICIDES IN PUNJAB 1988-1998



These diverse trends also negate the proposition that there has been spate of suicides in a particular year in the whole of Punjab.

Thus, there is no isomorphic relationship between suicides and crop failure.

MEANS ADOPTED TO COMMIT SUICIDE : INDIA AND PUNJAB

A comparative analysis of 1995 data for both India and Punjab shows that poisoning appear to be the most convenient means of suicide.

Table -2.7
DISTRIBUTION OF SUICIDE BY MEANS ADOPTED
(SAMPLE DATA) PUNJAB

MODE OF SUICIDE	PERCENTAGE
By consuming pesticides	58.50
By self-immolation	9.40
By hanging	9.40
By overdose of drugs	7.50
By jumping in well	7.50
Not exactly known	3.80
By touching electric wires	1.90
By coming under running train	1.90

Source: Field survey 1998 IDC

In Punjab, as many as 31 victims, comprising 58 per cent of the cases, committed suicide by consuming pesticides. This is revealing as it shows the impact of the green revolution on the mode of suicide in the state. Secondly, the traditional method of committing suicide such as hanging, drowning, etc., were less in use. Thirdly, the violent means of committing suicide such as by self-immolation or by electric shock and by throwing oneself in front of a running train are reported in negligible number of cases.

Table -2.8
DISTRIBUTION OF SUICIDE BY MEANS ADOPTED IN 1995
(ALL INDIA)

Sr.No.	Means adopted	% Share In suicides
1	By over alcoholism	1.06
2	By drowning	10.08
3	By fire / self immolation	11.13
4	By firearms	0.74
5	By hanging	24.44
6	By consuming insecticides / poison	37.53
7	By self-infliction of injuries	1.20
	JUMPING	0.97
8	By jumping from building	0.43
9	By jumping from other sites	0.54
10	By jumping off moving vehicle / train	1.01
11	By machine	0.08
12	By overdose of sleeping pills	0.69
13	By touching electric wires	0.73
14	By coming under running vehicles / trains	3.16
15	By other means	7.17
	TOTAL	100.00

SOURCE : N.C.R.B.(M.H.A.)

The use of pesticides is rapidly becoming a serious health hazard in Punjab villages. The study team during its visits to the villages came across cases where accidental deaths of some farm labourers were reported to have occurred due to their excessive exposure to pesticides in the course of spraying operations in the fields. Another point that emerges from the comparison is that the traditional methods of committing suicide are much less represented in our sample than in the all-India survey.

SUICIDE CAUSATION - INDIA AND PUNJAB : MACRO TRENDS

There is a widespread belief that suicides have been occurring due to indebtedness. A number of cases which have been reported, attributed primacy to indebtedness to establish a causal relationship.

Table 2.9
DISTRIBUTION OF SUICIDE BY CAUSES 1995

Causes of suicide	% India	% Punjab
Domestic discord	26.1	19.26
Illness (physical and mental)	20.2	14.4
Economic causes	10.0	7.06
Impotency	0.00	0.64
Death of a dear person	15.0	4.65
Drug abuse	0.00	0.16
Failure in exams	0.8	1.61
Fall in social reputation	1.5	0.96
Property dispute	0.00	0.80
Rape/Incest	0.2	0.00
Not known	19.8	47.03
Other causes	16.7	2.41

Source: N.C.R.B. (M.H.A.)

In other words, the attempt is to explain suicides in terms of uni-factor analysis. For instance, National Crime Bureau data attributed single factor explanation to the suicides. The nature of causes identified for suicides in India and Punjab followed a similar pattern. Domestic discord accounted for the maximum number of suicides, followed by illness and economic causes respectively. Domestic discord accounted for the maximum number of suicides for the year 1995 both in India and Punjab.

At the all-India level, 26.1 per cent of the suicides were due to discord within the family. In Punjab this causation was cited to account for 19.26 per cent of the suicides. Of the known causes, illness including terminal diseases and mental illness accounted for 22 per cent of the suicides at the national level, whereas for Punjab it was 14.4 per cent. Around eight per cent of these accounted for insanity in Punjab and substantially lower at 4.2 per cent for the Indian average. The third cause i.e. economic crisis including poverty, unemployment and decline in economic status remains the same for the state and national figures, being 10 per cent and 7.06 per cent for India and Punjab respectively. Other reasons for suicide were death of a dear person, drug abuse, failure in exams and fall in social

reputation. However, the data collected from the field indicate that suicides need to be analysed as a multifactor causal phenomenon. There is ample evidence to show that each incident of suicide has been the result of various cumulative factors like family discord, drug addiction, indebtedness etc. Each factor has to be given weightage in the overall context of economic, political, socio-cultural situation experienced by the victim.

SUICIDE TRENDS IN PUNJAB

An analysis of macro data, as detailed above, indicate the following distinct trends;

- Punjab's suicide rate is much lower in comparison with other Indian states.
- A sharp increase in the suicide rate in Punjab coincides with the post-1992 phase.
- Suicide rate among the cultivators is high as compared with non-cultivators.
- Suicide-prone districts in Punjab are Sangrur, Bathinda, Mansa, Firozpur and Faridkot.
- A higher proneness among farmers has been noted in Sangrur, Bathinda, Mansa, Amritsar, Firozpur and Gurdaspur districts.
- No seasonal spate of suicides as these incidents are spread over the whole year.

These trends provided a canvas for field investigations. Each specific case of suicide has been understood in the overall macro context, but at the same time the micro situations and local factors have been given due weightage.

SECTION - III

CRISIS OF AGRARIAN TRANSFORMATION AND SUICIDES IN PUNJAB

The problem of suicides in Punjab should be understood in the context of the crisis in the agrarian society of which agriculture is a part. The crisis has social, cultural and economic dimensions.

The economic development as reflected in commercialisation of agriculture lacked inner dynamism for building up inter-sectoral linkages, sharpened economic inequalities in the rural society and caused environmental degradation. These developments created distortions in the social fabric of Punjab's rural life which in turn consumed the virtues of the green revolution and multiplied its vices. To overcome these negative developments, over-exploitation of the natural resources, and blatant use of social practices like dowry were resorted to. These tendencies further deepened the agrarian crisis.

The green revolution strategy, no doubt, contributed to the development of agriculture. The level of agricultural growth can be gauged from the fact that it contributes about 47 per cent of the state GDP as compared with 30 per cent in India. Agriculture in Punjab has been growing at the rate of five per cent per year for about three decades. The state produces 24 per cent of cotton, 22 per cent of wheat, 9 per cent of rice of the total output of the country. The level of technological inputs like tractors, tubewells, harvesting combines and other modern machines, chemicals, insecticides, weedicides, can match any agriculturally advanced country of the world. It has a cropping intensity of 184 per cent. It consumes 10 per cent of the fertilisers, 11 per cent of the pesticides, 55 per cent of the herbicides used in the country.

Inspite of all this, the growth of agriculture is mainly confined to two crops and has reached its saturation level. It is evident from the data on productivity levels. The productivity of rice was 4.89 per cent during 1965-66 to 1985-86 which declined to 0.58 per cent between 1985-86 to 1996-97. The productivity of wheat has also declined from 2.79 to 2.14, sugarcane declined from 3.40 to 0.28 in the corresponding period. The productivity of cotton (Desi) was -2.47 between 1965-66 to 1985-86 which increased to 1.63 between 1985-86 to 1996-97. However, the total production of cotton in the state declined from 19.25 lakh bales in 1996-97 to 9.41 lakh bales in 1997-98. The significant fact is that stagnation in agriculture is adversely affecting the rural economy of Punjab.

There is a decline in the size of operational holdings in Punjab. About 45 five per cent of the farms are smaller than 2 hectares and these account for twelve per cent of the total area. Small size holdings have increased from 38.6 per cent (1981) to 44.7 per cent in 1991. The increase in the number of marginal holdings (less than 1 hectare) was higher at 7.1 per cent. This is significant because small farms are increasingly becoming uneconomical.¹

¹ The fragmentation of land has contributed to economic hardship of small and marginal farmers. For instance, a former sarpanch of village Sakrodi, Sangrur district, after killing his wife and son committed suicide. Investigations revealed that he was under heavy debt and in order to pay the debt he wanted to sell some portion of his land. When he finalised the deal there was a severe conflict with his wife and one night before the buyers were to come he killed his wife and son with a sword and later himself consumed pesticide.

The situation had become worse when two of his brothers separated from him and division of land took place. The brothers refused to contribute anything towards the repayment of loan as it stood in the name of the victim. According to one of his close friends he was depressed because of the attitude of his brothers.

He was not able to return the loan due to crop damage and finally his decision to sell a portion of land invoked sharp negative reaction from his wife which led to the disastrous incident.

Table - 3.1
SIZE OF OPERATIONAL HOLDING IN PUNJAB (1990-91)

Category of holdings	Size Group (Hectares)	% of total holding	% of total area
Marginal & Small	Below 2.0	44.72	12.21
Semi-Medium	2.0 - 4.0	25.86	20.87
Medium	4.0 - 10.0	23.41	40.22
Large	10.0 & above	6.01	26.70

Source : Statistical Abstract of Punjab 1997.

According to Punjab Agriculture University estimates, the annual surplus of the small size farm is about Rs. 9,500/-. It is further estimated that a "best managed five-hectare farm, i.e. more than 80 per cent of the farms with standard field crop rotation can earn barely an income equivalent to the average per capita income of Punjab." The ratio of agricultural surpluses between the very small and the very large is almost 11 times in Punjab.

Table - 3.2
AGRICULTURE SURPLUSES (INCOME — DOMESTIC EXPENDITURE)

Farm size categories	Annual income	Annual domestic expenditure	Annual surplus
Col (1)	Col (2)	Col (3)	Col (4)
Very small (0-2.5)	15940.47	12076.07	3864.40
Small (2.5-5.0)	26621.00	17124.96	9496.04
Medium (5.0-10.0)	32308.90	16731.71	15577.19
Large (10-15)	48202.49	19786.10	28416.39
Very large (15+)	69029.58	26913.29	43016.29
All categories	38066.66	18384.48	19682.18
Ratio between very small and very large	4.33	2.23	11.13

Source : Department of Economics and Sociology; PAU Ludhiana.

A study into the Economics of Farming in the Punjab (1983-84)

Further, the data on distribution of household consumer expenditure in rural Punjab show that there is a decline in the share of landless labourers, small and marginal farmers in asset and income distribution. For instance, the top ten per cent of the households have more than seven times the

come of the bottom 10 per cent households as per 1989 NSS survey data. This fact can also be substantiated from the total quantum of debt and share of different sizes of holdings in the total debt.

According to Shergill study, the total debt on the farmers in the state is Rs. 700 crore.² This debt is about 70 per cent of the Net Domestic Product originated in the state in a year. In other words, three-fourths of one year's total agricultural income of the state has to be paid if the total amount of the debt is to be liquidated. However, to freeze the annual recurring interest charged on the total debt, about 13.2 per cent of the total farm land area of the state has to be mortgaged by the farmers.

Table - 3.3
DISTRIBUTION OF HOUSEHOLD CONSUMER EXPENDITURE IN
RURAL PUNJAB

Rural	Punjab 1989	Punjab 1987-88
Bottom 10 per cent	4.36	3.68
Top 10 per cent	27.27	25.36
Bottom 20 per cent	9.26	8.76
Top 20 per cent	41.69	40.66
Bottom 30 per cent	15.29	13.71
Top 30 per cent	53.00	51.98
Bottom 50 per cent	29.33	29.38
Top 50 per cent	70.67	70.62

Source : 1. E.S.O. Punjab : N.S.S. 38th Round
2. N.S.S. 43rd Round Sarvekshna (1989)

The districts of Sangrur, Bathinda and Mansa which have high share of farmers' suicides also have a higher debt burden. The per farmer indebtedness is very high in these districts. For example, in Bathinda and Mansa short term mean amount borrowed per year per farmer is about Rs. 10,000/- and per operated acre borrowing per year is about Rs. 6,000/-. This is the highest among all the agro-climatic zones.

See for details, H.S. Shergill (1998), Rural Credit and Indebtedness in Punjab, Institute for Development and Communication, Chandigarh.

Sangrur district, which falls in another agro-climatic zone (including Patiala and Fatehgarh Sahib), has a greater hold of commission agents in the short-term credit market. The commission agents meet 75 per cent of the total short term credit needs of the farmers in this zone. The burden of debt varies inversely with the size of the holding. The liability in the form of debt of small and marginal farmers is to the extent of Rs. 1229.58 crore i.e. 21.5 per cent of the total debt.

Table - 3.4
INDEBTEDNESS OF PUNJAB FARMERS

Total	Rs. 5700.91 crore
<u>Purpose of credit</u>	
Short-term productive	54.72
Long-term productive	25.39
Non-productive	19.89
<u>Source of credit</u>	
Commercial banks	19.42
Co-operatives	27.14
Commission agents	36.32
Mortgagor (agricultural)	7.12
Annual interest charges	Rs. 1102.78 crore

Source : H.S. Shergill (1998), Rural Credit and Indebtedness in Punjab, Institute for Development and Communication, Chandigarh.

The per acre debt is the highest among small farmers (Rs. 10105/-) whereas debt in the case of large farmer is Rs. 4230/-. It is interesting to note that the greater proportion of the debt of the small and marginal farmers originated from loans taken for non-productive purposes. Therefore, it is not surprising that a majority of those who are adversely affected are the most vulnerable sections like the landless labourers, small and marginal farmers. For instance, a large amount of debt is socially induced among these sections. Sixty eight per cent of suicide victims' families have a debt on them because of unproductive expenditure as compared to 20 per cent of general households.

Table - 3.5
USAGE OF CREDIT BY THE FARMERS

Purpose	Suicide Victim's Household	General Household (Sampled)
Productive	31.80	80.00
Unproductive	68.20	20.00

Source : IDC, Field Survey, 1998

The crisis of agrarian transformation is clearly borne out in our field investigations. It was found that there was widespread use of these households used these loans for meeting daily household needs, marriages and family celebrations and events, buying of consumer goods, alcohol and drugs etc. (Table 3.5) A number of suicides were noticed among those for whom the use of credit for conspicuous consumption had aggravated the stress situation.

The incidence of drug abuse has also been found to be very high in the districts of Sangrur, Bathinda, Mansa and Firozepur. The usage of drugs can be gauged from the quantum of recovery from smugglers and drug peddlers. According to official records 265 quintals of poppy husk was recovered from peddlers and smugglers during 1997 in Punjab as a whole. Sangrur district topped with 397 registered cases under the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act.³ According to a study, about 90 per cent of the farmers and farm hands in the cotton belt take drugs and many of them are drug addicts.⁴ Our field survey indicates that the frequency of the intake of alcohol is high among suicide victims' families.

³ For details, see Sarbjit Singh; 'Poppy Plays Havoc with Youth', The Tribune, June 6, 1998.

⁴ These estimates are from press reports quoting Neerja Bassi, Project Director of Bathinda Drug Deaddiction Centre. Kuldeep Mann, 'Punjab Farmers Under Debt', The Tribune, June 15, 1998.

About 68 per cent of the suicide victims were drinkers as compared to 4 per cent of the general population sample. (For details see Table 4.10)

For instance, a 26-year-old widow explained how her husband became a poppy addict, four years ago. Of the 1.5 acre of land, he sold one acre to pay the debt incurred by him to meet the needs of his addiction. The family had no loans for agricultural practices. Bali, the widow, now lives in a dilapidated house, the ruins of which narrate the one-time grandeur of the structure. Her belongings now are a few clothes and utensils.

In contrast to this group, a majority of sampled farmers i.e. about 80 per cent used these loans for productive purposes and thereby avoided the debt trap. However, the fact is that the small and marginal farmers are living in economic hardship, social pressure and psychological stress. It is not to deny that the small and marginal peasants and even the landless labourers did benefit from the trickle-down effect of the green revolution. However, they had to pay a heavy social cost. In a caste-ridden milieu, the penetration of consumerism and its demonstration, in terms of conspicuous consumption and widespread effects of dowry (for instance) constrained the capacity of these sections to improve their quality of life.

Table - 3.6
STRATAWISE INCIDENCE OF DOWRY DEATHS AND DOWRY HARASSMENT IN RURAL PUNJAB FOR 1994

	Higher strata	Upper middle strata	Lower middle strata	Lower strata
Dowry death	17.72	36.98	45.30	0.00
Dowry harassment	17.03	34.42	47.12	1.43

Source : Study on Atrocities Against Women in Punjab, 1994, Institute for Development and Communication, Chandigarh.

The lower middle strata was found to account for 47 per cent and 45 per cent of the cases of rural dowry harassment and dowry deaths respectively. Affluence provided an added material base to the practice of dowry and the existing social value system gave it legitimacy. The demonstration

effect further pauperized the socially deprived sections. The helplessness of this section to maintain the demands of conspicuous consumption, manifested in an increase in dowry can be gauged from the extent of dowry atrocities.

The practice of dowry is making the small farmer vulnerable. For example, one of the respondents was once a mother of five sons and a daughter. The family owned five acres of land and made a supplementary income from four head of cattle. Of the three elder sons, one died a "natural death" while two committed suicide. None of them was educated. In 1991, one of the sons, who was engaged and was to be married committed suicide. His would-be wife, was later married to the younger brother, who killed himself by consuming pesticide in 1996. The family had taken a loan from the arhatia about 11 years ago to meet the expenses of the marriage of the only daughter. The family sold one acre of land and is yet to pay Rs. 80,000/-.

The social and cultural component of the liabilities made the position of small and marginal peasants and landless labourers more precarious. For example, the educated male unemployed in rural Punjab during July 1987 - June 1988 were 164 out of 1000 unemployed as compared to 143 per 1000 unemployed in India as a whole (NSS 43rd Round July 1987-June 1988). The total number of educated unemployed persons as in 1996 on the live register of employment exchange in Punjab was 58 of the total unemployed. (See Table 3.7). The green revolution did not create sufficient conditions and necessary opportunities of employment. The unemployed with technical training constituted 13.70 per cent of the total educated unemployed in Punjab as in 1996. The unemployed without

technical training were 86.30 per cent. Sixty-one per cent of the non-technical persons were matriculates. (See Table 3.7)

Table - 3.7
PERCENTAGE OF EDUCATED UNEMPLOYED PERSONS IN
DIFFERENT CATEGORIES (OUT OF TOTAL REGISTERED
UNEMPLOYED PERSONS) IN PUNJAB (1996)

S.No.	Category according to qualifications	Number of registered unemployed persons (Educated)	% of unemployed persons out of total educated unemployed persons
1.	Matriculate freshers	1,65,091	52.65
2.	Under graduate freshers	36,089	11.51
3.	Graduate freshers	29,984	9.56
4.	Post-graduate freshers	8,305	2.65
5.	Graduate engineers	1,052	0.34
6.	Diploma engineer	7,213	2.30
7.	Craftsmen trained, IIT and work experienced	33,516	10.69
8.	Doctors	541	0.17
9.	Agriculture specialists	640	0.20
10.	Teachers	31,157	9.93
TOTAL (Educated unemployed)		313,588	100.00
Percentage of educated unemployed out of total unemployed given below		57.78	
Total unemployed register as in 1996		542695	

Source : Director of Employment, Punjab.

The data clearly show the following trends :

- a) An overwhelming number of person are the educated unemployed in Punjab. Access to education has increased, but employment opportunities have not expanded correspondingly.
- b) Non-technical educated unemployed outnumber the unemployed with technical training.
- c) Matriculates constitute more than 60 per cent of the non-technical unemployed.
- d) Among the technically trained unemployed teachers, craftsmen and diploma engineers are large in numbers.

A youth born to privileges has a higher probability of getting a job as compared to one belonging to the underprivileged sections.

Table - 3.8
DISTRICTWISE LITERACY RATE IN PUNJAB

District	Literacy rate (in percentage)
Hoshiarpur	70.82
Jalandhar	68.45
Rupnagar	68.05
Ludhiana	67.35
Fatehgarh Sahib	63.43
Kapurthala	63.31
Gurdaspur	61.84
Amritsar	58.09
Patiala	57.50
Faridkot	49.42
Firozepur	48.01
Bathinda	46.48
Sangrur	45.99
Mansa	37.21
Punjab	58.51

Source : Director, Census Operation, Punjab, 1991

Note : Literacy has been worked out after excluding age group 0-6 population in 1991 census.

It has been observed that unemployment is concentrated in the low income bracket i.e. more than 65 per cent of the educated unemployed youth belong to families with income less than Rs. 2,000/- only.⁵ This has acquired an alarming proportion as a substantial number of suicides victims fall in the age group of 15-29. About 7.1 per cent of them belong to landless, small and marginal farmers families according to IDC field survey, 1998

Another indicator of social development is the literacy level. The data on socio-economic profile of suicide victims show that a majority of them were illiterates. And about 87 per cent of these illiterates were young, in the age group of 15-29. The districts which are highly prone to suicides

⁵ For details, see Pramod Kumar (1992), An Evaluative Study of Educated Unemployed Youth and Their Aspirations. Punjab Labour Department and Safety Council, Chandigarh.

have the lowest literacy rate in the state. The literacy rate of Bathinda (46.48 per cent), Mansa (37.21 per cent) and Sangrur (45.99 per cent) are much below the state's literacy rate of 58.51 per cent as per 1991 data. (See Table 3.8). This has been reinforced by a news report in The Hindu. It reads as follows;

On the road joining villages, Chural Kalan and Chotian, a group of youth in the age group of 20 to 25 years mentioned that none of them had ever been to school, while they belonged to families of the upper caste "Jats". The family land holding did not exceed five acres in each case and after passing over to next generation each piece would be divided into atleast two parts. They observed that "One of our friends hanged himself to death, because the family had to sell off the land to repay a loan. Then nobody marries his daughter to a Jat's son who is not going to inherit any land. He was uneducated and so could not get a decent job".⁶

The sense of rootlessness is seizing a substantial number of rural youths and in the absence of any alternative, some of them are finding escape routes.

The social institutions which are supposed to provide grievance redressal and also sometimes escape routes became redundant and individual centred. This became amply clear when a majority of suicide victims' families opined that they found it futile to approach social institutions like panchayats, mahilla mandals etc. For instance, panchayats do not consider dowry per se as a problem. But dowry demand that too excessive demand incompatible with the status and material capacity of the giver, is considered a problem. In fact certain panches have a ready check list of dowry items to match the strata and status of the giver. Therefore panchayat as a social support system does not mitigate social hardships.

⁶ Sarbjit Pandher, 'Driven to death by debt' The Hindu, April 22, 1998

pecially those of the small and marginal peasants. A comparison between the perception of the families of suicide victims as compared with general sampled population shows that the suicide victims do not approach the village support institutions because to them these institutions have ceased to be social and are apathetic to the needs of the underprivileged sections. The decay of the village support systems has been accompanied by a dilution of kinship ties and community based social existence. A substantial number of suicide victims' families mentioned that the relatives were not helpful.

Similarly, the traditional concept of the village community taking care of the needs of its members has been replaced by individual oriented living. The social order continues to be hierarchical, intermeshed with the pressures of competition, exhibitionism and consumerism. Economic development and 10 years of turmoil have fractured the village community — its traditional institutions, the authority system and formative patterns. This has aggravated the tensions in the rural setting.

During the period of terrorism, all these institutions, authority systems and formative patterns were undermined. The panchayats were replaced by rotational *khalsa* panchayats, village elders like *Nambardars* were replaced by young militants and community norms and practices were flouted. The near collapse of these social processes created a situation of rootlessness and traumatised the people. It is in this background that the increase in suicides as a post-militancy stress phenomenon should be analysed.

The following distinct trends emerged from the above analysis;

- Limitations of the 'grain revolution' and lack of inner dynamism to build-up forward and backward inter-sectoral linkages.
- Decline in the size of operational holdings and fragmentation of land and pauperization of the small and marginal farmers.
- Decline in the growth rate of crop productivity.
- Increase in input costs and corresponding fall in income of the small and marginal farmers.
- Higher share of debt of small and marginal farmers.
- Higher concentration of debt in Bathinda and Mansa zone.
- Low literacy rate in Sangrur, Bathinda and Mansa.
- Manifold increase in conspicuous consumption expenditure like alcohol, drug addiction etc.
- Diversion of economic resources to social celebrations and to meet immediate needs.
- Raise 'money' through easily available credit and spend it on consumer goods and conspicuous consumption.
- Mismatch between preference and aptitude of the youth and between their aspirations and capabilities.

SECTION - IV

DISTINCTIVE FEATURES OF SUICIDE VICTIMS

The crisis of the agrarian society has adversely affected the farming community. An analysis of the macro data indicates that the suicide rate among the farmers is higher as compared with that of the non-farmers. Among the farmers, again the most vulnerable sections are the small and marginal farmers and landless labourers. This inference drawn from the macro analysis is further reinforced by the data on the socio-economic profile of the suicide victims which is presented in this section.

Small and marginal farmers' and landless labourers' proneness to suicide

It has been shown in the preceding section that a large segment of small and marginal farmers is under socially induced debt, unable to sustain the benefits of the green revolution, not sufficiently equipped to explore other avenues of income augmentation, and not exposed to marketable skills and technology. Further, fragmentation of land has pauperised them. The weakening of family and kinship ties has multiplied the cost of living of the rural people, particularly of the small and marginal farmers. Consequently, they have become psychologically distressed, socially alienated and economically depressed.

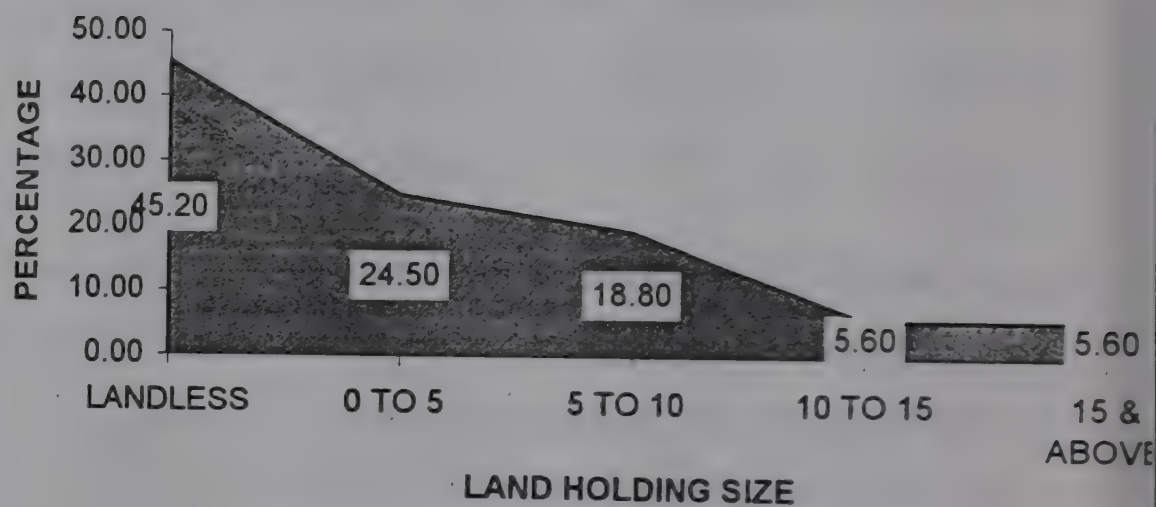
Therefore, it is not surprising that a significant percentage of suicide victims, as high as about 45 per cent, belong to the landless group. They are followed by marginal and small farmers, who account for nearly 25 per cent of the suicide cases. The most striking feature is the decline in the percentage of suicides with increase in the size of land holdings.

Table - 4.1
SIZE OF LAND HOLDING (SUICIDE VICTIMS)

Size (acres)	Percentage
Landless labourers	45.20
0 - 5	24.50
5 - 10	18.80
10 - 15	5.60
15+	5.60

Graph 4.1

SUICIDE VICTIMS' LAND HOLDING SIZE



Thus suicide victims came mainly from the landless group or farmers with marginal or small land holdings. Revealing as this finding is, it indicates increasing vulnerability of the landless labour and the poor farmers to the stresses and strains produced by the crisis of agrarian transformation.

YOUTH AS A POTENTIAL SUICIDE VICTIM

Stagnant agriculture, land fragmentation, and unavailability of non-farm economic opportunities in the villages have accentuated the deprivation of children born to underprivileged sections. The youth, after having experienced deprivations with little hope of finding access to

opportunities, specially after having sufficient exposure to the consumerist way of living, is caught in a vicious circle.

About 60 per cent of the total cases of suicide fall in the age group of 15-29. This over representation of the young age group appears to be surprising because;

- (a) it is at variance with the trend in many other parts of the world where the increase in the incidence of suicide keeps pace with advancing age. Thus, unlike many other parts of the world suicide in rural Punjab seems to be predominantly a phenomenon of the young age.
- (b) It is also at variance with the proportion of total population in this age group of Punjab. It may, however, be pointed out that the distribution in our study compares somewhat favourably with that of India as whole as per 1995 data. However, there is a higher representation of suicide victims in the 15-29 age group in our study as compared to the all-India situation.

Table - 4.2
AGE WISE DISTRIBUTION OF SUICIDE VICTIMS

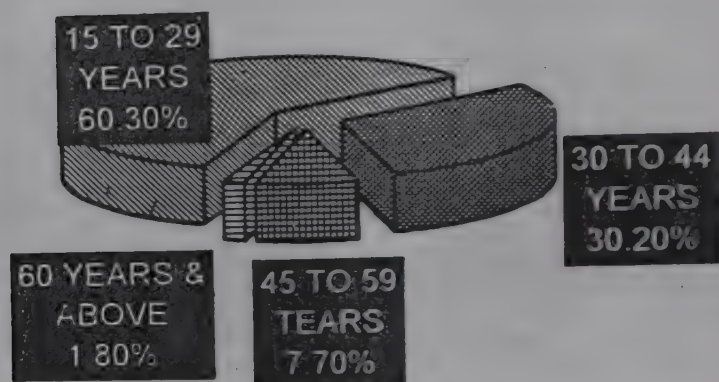
Age category	Punjab (Field survey, 1998)	India 1995 N.C.R.B.
Up to 14 Years	0.00	3.56
15-29	60.30	40.90
30-44	30.20	32.61
45-59	7.70	16.76
60 Years and above	1.80	6.17

According to the IDC field survey, a majority i.e. 71 per cent of the suicide victims from among the landless labourers, and small and marginal farmers fall in the age group of 15-29. Alarming as it is, it is indicative of there being something drastically wrong with the

social situation in which the youth in rural Punjab is placed. The youth in rural Punjab seems to be a victim of heightened aspirations in a framework of limited opportunity structures.

Graph - 4.2

DIFFERENT AGE GROUPS' SHARE IN SUICIDES



At the same time, employment opportunities seem to be out of pace with such aspirations, if not shrinking. For instance, a 25-year-old boy of Mehal Kalan village (Sangrur district) hanged himself because he was not inclined to do manual labour. He considered it below his dignity to work as a labourer and was having fights with his mother and brother every day for money so that he could start his own business. The youths have high aspirations which are not rooted in the soil. Their preferences have no linkage with aptitude. There is a strong belief that it is possible to overcome competition by ascriptive group affiliations. The outcome is a take to excessive alcoholism, drug addiction, dowry demands and extreme cases commit suicide.

LACK OF EDUCATION AMONG SUICIDE VICTIMS

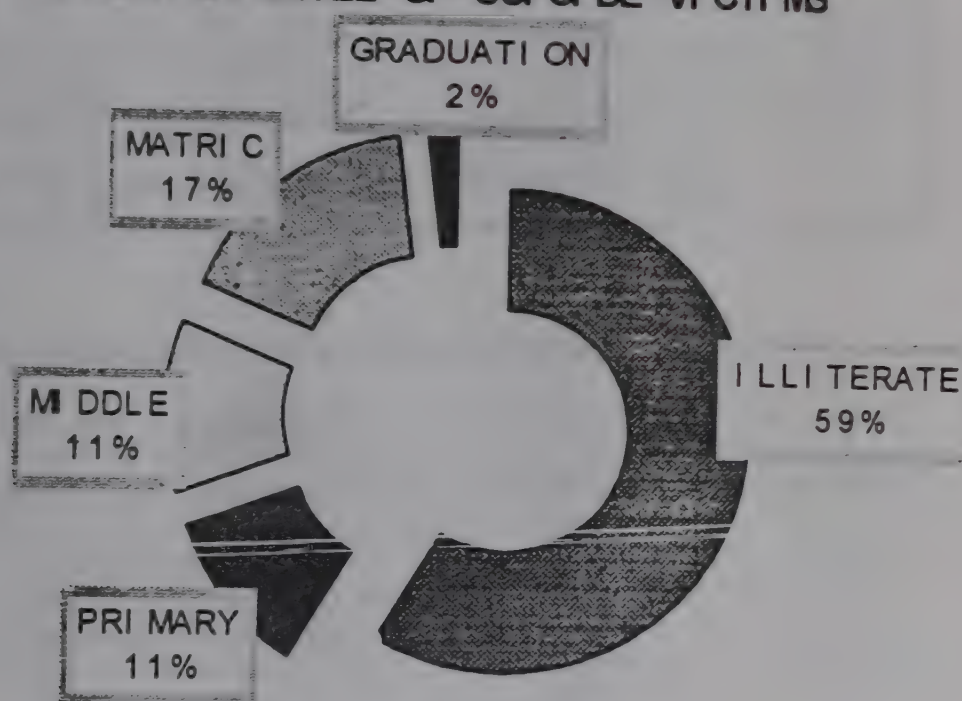
Lack of education emerges as another prominent feature of the social background of the suicide victims. This is evident from the fact that about 59 per cent of the cases were illiterate (See Table 4.3). Out of these 87 per cent were reported to be young.

Table - 4.3
EDUCATIONAL STATUS OF SUICIDE VICTIMS

Status	PERCENTAGE
Illiterate	58.50
Primary	11.30
Middle	11.30
Matric	17.00
Graduation	1.90

Graph 4.3

EDUCATION LEVEL OF SUICIDE VICTIMS



It gains in significance when viewed against the literacy rate of rural Punjab which is 58.51 per cent according to 1991 census. The low level of education, including primary and middle levels, accounts for another 23

per cent of the cases. Stated differently, lack of education, together with low level of education, accounts for 80 per cent of the cases.

Further, a comparison of our data with the educational status of the suicide victims at all-India level in 1995 shows that the proportion of suicide victims in the low education category is almost double in our study (Table 4.4).

Table - 4.4
EDUCATIONAL STATUS OF SUICIDE VICTIMS IN 1995
(ALL-INDIA)

Sr.No.	Education level	No of suicides	% share in suicides
1	No education	26102	29.27
2	Primary	23464	26.31
3	Middle	19098	21.42
4	Matriculate/ secondary	12541	14.06
5	Hr.secondary / intermediate / pre-university	4757	5.33
6	Diploma	1132	1.27
7	Graduate	1292	1.45
8	Post graduate and above	792	0.89
	Total	89178	100.00

SOURCE : N.C.R.B. (M.H.A.)

Lack of education thus emerges as a significant background characteristic of the suicide victims under investigation. No less important is the percentage of matriculates, i.e., 17, among our suicide victims. It may actually even prompt suicide if not accompanied by augmentation of employment opportunities. The presence of a graduate victim in our study further illustrates this.

Weakening relational paradigm and suicide proneness

Agrarian crisis has not only pushed certain sections on the margins, but also created a strain in the functioning of certain social institutions such as

the family. Family seems to have ceased to serve as a forum for sharing of stresses and anxieties. Hence the relevance of marital status and family size.

Table - 4.5
MARITAL STATUS OF SUICIDE VICTIMS

Status	Percentage
Never married	17.00
Married	81.10
Widow	1.90

A vast majority of suicide victims i.e. 81 per cent, were married, with only 17 per cent as never married. About one-third of those married had no child, 39 per cent had only one child, 23 per cent had 2 children, and the percentage of those with three and four children came to 2.3 each. Interestingly, the percentage of suicide victims shows a declining trend with the rise in the number of children. This lends support to Durkheim's well-known thesis of inverse relationship between family density and the rate of suicide. It is not merely the family as an institution which is under stress, but there is also visible weakening of relational bondage.

(i) Inability to maintain satisfying interpersonal relationships

Moreover, 77.4 per cent of the victims were not able to maintain satisfying interpersonal relationships and were reported as having frequent discords with their family members including parents, wife and brothers (Table 4.6). Such discordant relations are likely to be frustrating, hurtful and generally pathogenic in their effect.

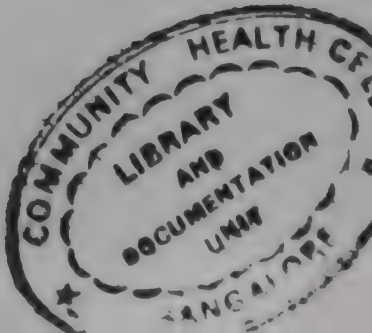


Table - 4.6
TYPE OF INTERPERSONAL RELATIONS OF THE SUICIDE VICTIMS

Status	Percentage
Disturbed interpersonal relations	77.40
Normal interpersonal relations	22.60

There is considerable evidence in literature to suggest that positive social and family relationship can moderate and lessen the negative effects of a severe crisis.

(ii) Suicide victims were loners

Lack of support renders a person more vulnerable. It weakens an individual's capacity to cope with the stresses and strains of social existence. In 88 per cent of the cases, the family members described the dead person as a loner, one who did not share his feelings with any one, neither family nor friends. This gains in salience when contracted with 74 per cent of the general sample respondents who were found to share their feelings of distress with their wives, children and friends. (See Table 4.7)

Table - 4.7
SOCIAL SUPPORT FOR SUICIDE VICTIMS AND GENERAL SAMPLE

Category	Percentage
Suicide victims	11.3
General sample	73.9

The data thus strongly points to the perceived lack of social support in respect of the suicide victims as compared to others. About 90 per cent of the suicide victims were reported to have no social support.

Table - 4.8
PERCEIVED SOURCE OF SUPPORT FOR SUICIDE VICTIMS AND
GENERAL SAMPLE

Category	Wife	Mother	Father	Children	Friends	Relatives	Siblings	Engage in spiritual activities
Suicide victims	5.70	3.80	1.90	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
General Sample	29.00	28.30	1.70	3.40	16.80	11.80	4.20	8.40

RELIGIOUS GROUP AFFILIATION AND RELIGIOSITY

Table - 4.9
SUICIDE VICTIMS AND GENERAL SAMPLE POPULATION BY
RELIGION

	Suicide victims	General population
Hindu	26.4	19.91
Sikh	71.7	72.75
Muslim	1.9	7.15
Others	—	0.19

As for the religious background of suicide victims, a look at table 4.9 reveals that about 72 per cent of them were Sikhs, while 26 per cent were Hindus, with a negligible representation of Muslims. Notably this distribution of suicide victims by religion is by-and-large in accordance with the religious composition of the general population of the area of the study. This means that religious background makes no difference to the incidence of suicide.

Various families of the general population sample survey reported having faith in religious principles and their frequent indulgence in religious activities such as prayer etc. Even those who are not regular in following religious activities, but have faith in supernatural power reported that they find solace from anxieties during crisis. Whereas very few members of suicide victims' families were religion oriented. But at the same time some of these families were found to be superstitious. As a brother of a suicide

victim in Aspal Kalan village (Sangrur district) reported that the sufferings of their family were due to some evil force.

A landless labourer of Mehilghela village (Nawanshahr district) asserted, that he believed in doctrines of Hinduism which preach the concept of 'Life after death' and if a man who takes his own life commits an immoral act against the wishes of God he will be punished in his next birth. He further added that man's life was God's property and man had no right to end it.

In Barohi village (Nawanshahr district) it was revealed that taking one's own life was an act of cowardice, which a true Sikh should never think of. Some others reported that Guru Gobind Singh's doctrine '*Nishcay kar Apni Jeet Karo*' provided them with motivation to fight back the problems of life.

ALCOHOL AND ILLICIT DRUG USERS AND SUICIDE

In the study, 68 per cent of the victims were reported to be heavy drinkers, a majority of them being chronic ones (Table 4.10).

Table - 4.10
ALCOHOL USE AMONG THE SUICIDE VICTIMS AND GENERAL SAMPLE

	Victims	General sample
Incidence	67.9	48.7
<u>Frequency of Intake</u>		
Frequently	41.5	12.6
Sometimes	22.6	23.5
Rarely	3.8	12.6

This is a very significant finding as alcoholism has been described as "chronic suicide."

Twenty-six per cent of the suicide victims were reported to be illicit drug users, with 15 per cent taking tablets, 7.5 per cent opium and 3.8 per cent poppy husk (Table 4.11 and 4.12).

Table - 4.11
DRUG ABUSE ADDICTION AMONG THE VICTIMS AND GENERAL SAMPLE

	Victims	General sample
Incidence	26.4	4.2
Frequency of intake		
Frequently	17.0	2.5
Sometimes	9.4	1.7

Table - 4.12
NATURE OF DRUGS

Category	Opium	Tablets	Poppy-husk
Suicide victims	7.5	15.12	3.8
General sample	1.7	1.7	0.8

In the general sample, 48.7 per cent of the respondents were taking alcohol (less than the suicide victims) and only 4.2 per cent were illicit drug users, that too, much less than the victims.

SUICIDE VICTIMS AND MENTAL STRESS

Table - 4.13
EXPERIENCE OF STRESSFUL LIFE-EVENT REPORTED SINCE 1990

Category	Yes	No
Suicide victims	92.5	7.5
General sample	48.7	51.3

Among the victims, 93 per cent (Table 4.13) were reported as having gone through some stressful events in life whereas in the general sample 49 per cent reported the presence of stressful events in their lives.

The distinctive features of the suicide victims that emerge from the above analysis are as follows.

- (a) Suicide victims belong to the young age group of 15-29 years;
- (b) Mainly drawn from landless, small and marginal farmers;
- (c) They were illiterates or educated up to primary;
- (d) Were having stressful life events.
- (e) High on alcohol and illicit drug use;
- (f) Majority were unable to maintain inter-personal relationships;
- (g) Suicide victims were loners;

SECTION - V

PRE-SUICIDE BEHAVIOURAL MANIFESTATIONS OF SUICIDE VICTIMS

Depressed and angry impulses, interpersonal crises of various sorts, failure and consequent self-devaluation, inner conflicts and the loss of a sense of meaning and hope, all these have been reported in available literature as associated with suicide. We, therefore, gathered information about the mental state of the suicide victims from the respondents.

MENTAL STATE OF THE SUICIDE VICTIMS

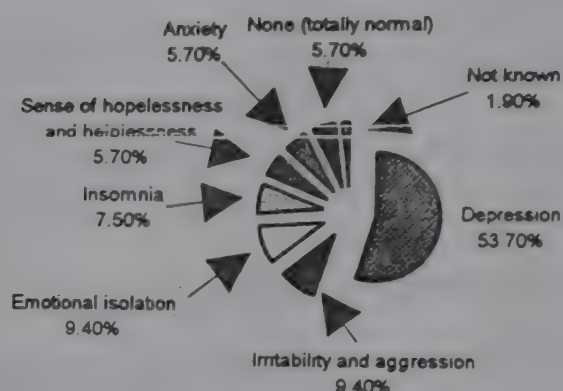
When the families were directly asked about the presence of mental illness in the deceased, the response was very low, but when they were asked what was the mental state of the deceased, a few days prior to the act, surprisingly a vast majority were identified by the family as having some psychiatric symptoms. Majority of the victims were reported to be suffering from symptoms like depression, irritability, anxiety and emotional isolation etc.

Table - 5.1
MENTAL AND BEHAVIOURAL DISTURBANCES OBSERVED IN
SUICIDE VICTIMS

Symptoms	Percentage
Depression	54.7
Irritability and aggression	9.4
Emotional isolation	9.4
Insomnia	7.5
Sense of hopelessness and helplessness	5.7
Anxiety	5.7
None (totally normal)	5.7
Not known	1.9

The table showing mental state of the victim before suicide, as reported by the respondents provides a clear picture regarding mental and behavioural disturbances these victims were suffering from.

Graph - 5.1
MENTAL AND BEHAVIOURAL DISTURBANCES
OBSERVED IN SUICIDE VICTIMS



Among the psychological problems, depression emerged as the most common symptom of suicide victims, as it was reported in 55 per cent of the cases. Persistent anorexia (loss of appetite), disinclination towards work, weakness, fatigue, unworthiness and lack of interest in social activities were some of the depressive symptoms reported among these victims. Significant weight loss and marked sadness of mood was also reported in some cases by the respondents. As a relative of a suicide victim at Bangan village (Sangrur district) informed us that a few days before the victim committed suicide, he was seen in very low spirits and he often used to cry over small issues.

Excessive anxiety was another common problem reported among 6 per cent of the victims. Some of these victims were reported to be over-

anxious regarding minor problems of living and had unrealistic or excessive worry, tension and uneasiness.

Nine per cent of the suicide victims were reported to be very irritable and aggressive by their family members. According to the respondents, these victims were low on stress tolerance and used to get easily irritated. A case was investigated at Aspal Kalan (Sangrur district) where a shopkeeper killed himself by consuming poison in 1994. According to his father, the victim used to demand money from him to open a big shop and on the latter's refusal he committed suicide. His mother and wife still felt terrified while describing the bouts of anger the victim used to exhibit during family quarrels. In another case, investigated at Mehal Kalan village, where a 25-year-old driver committed suicide by consuming poison, inquiries revealed the impulsive nature of the victim. Neighbours reported that due to his aggressive tendencies he used to beat and abuse his wife and nobody in the family could dare to intervene.

Nine per cent of the victims were reported to be withdrawn, avoiding all social contacts. The respondents reported the reluctance of these victims to enter into social relationships and discuss their problems. Probably due to this self-imposed emotional isolation, the victim found himself totally helpless in dealing with the crises and ultimately resorted to suicidal behaviour.

Researches have also shown a significant relationship between suicide and loneliness.

Six per cent of the suicide victims were reported to have lost all hope regarding their future. These victims were also suffering from a feeling of helplessness in controlling the circumstances of their lives. Hopelessness denotes the pessimistic perception of these victims regarding the future. A

friend of a suicide victim at Longowal Khurd village revealed that one month before his suicide the victim used to assert during conversations that there was '*no future for him any more*'. Researches have revealed a positive correlation between a high degree of hopelessness and eventual risk of suicide.

Seeing oneself as incapable or helpless in coping with life's problems is conducive to disorganisation and confusion, which seemed to have happened in the case of these victims. It is possible that if a qualified mental health professional had helped these unfortunate individuals during crises, providing essential medical treatment support and guidance, at least some of them could have been saved.

Suicidal behaviour clues

The potentiality of suicide is greater if the individual has a history of repeated threats and other depressive symptoms. One out of five cases in our study had thrown broad hints that they might commit suicide. Fifteen per cent of the victims openly threatened to do so in the presence of relatives during family quarrels. In a case investigated from Aspal Kalan village, the suicide victim asked for money from his father and on the latter's refusal consumed pesticides in front of a hospital after threatening his family members to commit suicide. Probably he consumed poison to seek the attention of his family members and was hopeful of being rescued if he committed such an act in front of a hospital. Similarly a labourer who committed suicide in Chotian village following a severe conflict with his wife and in-laws used to say that he would be more happy to join his dead father than to live in this world. In psychological terms, these statements of the deceased were "cries for help." Such statements were both warnings and calls for help. It is unfortunate that they were not

taken seriously and no mental health services existed nearby where they could be examined and helped.

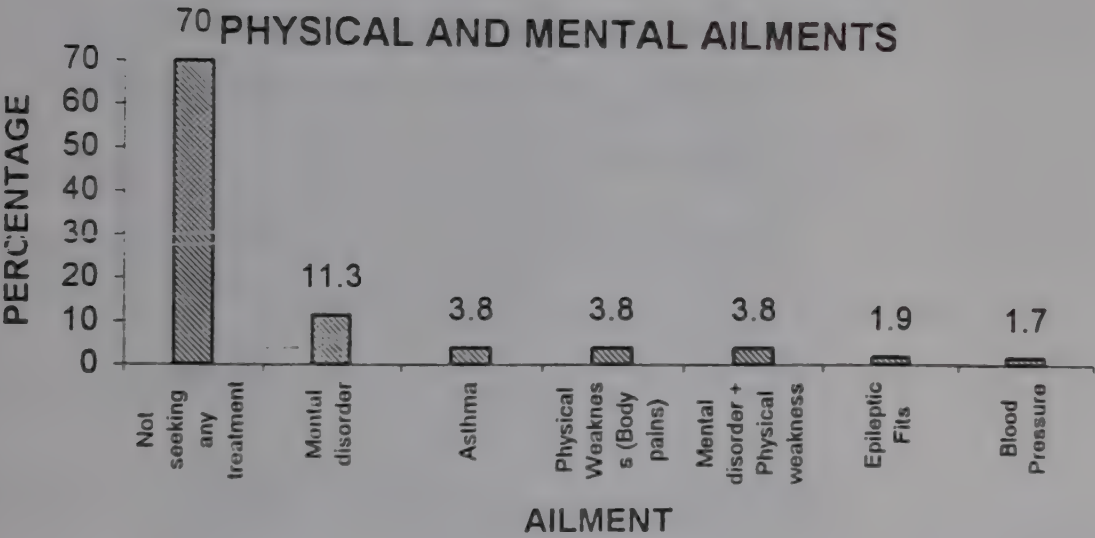
MENTAL AND PHYSICAL PROBLEMS

Researches have revealed a positive correlation between suicidal behaviour and physical and mental problems. This table supports the impression that some of the suicide victims were suffering from psychological as well as physical ailments. Eleven per cent were known to have mental disorders for which they were taking treatment.

Table - 5.2
PHYSICAL AND MENTAL AILMENTS

Ailments	Percentage
Not seeking any treatment	70.0
Mental disorder	11.3
Asthma	3.8
Physical weakness (body pains)	3.8
Mental disorder + physical weakness	3.8
Epileptic fits	1.9
Blood pressure	1.7

Graph - 5.2



In a case investigated in Talwandi village, the victim had committed suicide in 1992. According to his family, he had been suffering from severe mental disorder since his childhood and he used to have frequent fits during which he became unconscious. At other times, his behaviour was so violent and uncontrollable that he had to be tied with ropes. The problem of alcohol addiction was also reported in this case. He was not provided with adequate treatment as initially some local healer was treating him and only once he was taken to a hospital at Amritsar but no follow-up action was undertaken. The family elders thought his marriage to be the only solution of his illness but his wife left him just one month after the marriage. Obviously this person was suffering from a psychiatric disorder but due to lack of awareness negligible efforts were made for his proper treatment. Four per cent of the suicide victims had complaints of weakness and body pains which might also have been partly psychological in nature.

- To sum up, a vast majority of persons who committed suicide had gross psychological symptoms a few days before their death. These symptoms include depression, anxiety, insomnia, irritability and aggression, social withdrawal. Some of them had a history of serious mental illnesses which made them more vulnerable to suicide. It is quite likely that if a mental health specialist had seen them some of them would have been diagnosed as suffering from some mental illness. If properly treated at least some of them could have been saved.
- Almost one-fifth of the sample had given clear indications that they might commit suicide. But they were not taken seriously till one day they actually did it on some provocation. Unfortunately, no help in the form of psychiatric treatment or psychological counselling was available.
- A majority of suicide victims were having long-standing psychological stress. The presence of psychological stressful events was significantly higher compared with the general sample.
- The suicide victims less often shared their feelings with others and received emotional support as compared with the general sample.
- At present there are no mental health services available in most of the rural areas of Punjab, where an emotionally disturbed person can seek counselling and treatment. Medical staff at district and primary health centres level do not have adequate training in mental health.

SECTION - VI

STUDY OF SUICIDE VICTIMS : INTERFACE OF SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS

Having noted in the preceding sections the trend of increase in the rate of suicides, as well as the trend of increase in suicides among the farmers in Punjab, it is pertinent to turn to the task of explaining it. The trend can be explained at two levels : macro and micro, the former seeking to situate the trend of rise in suicides in the broader socio-economic matrix of contemporary Punjab while the latter focusing on the interface of socio-economic and psychological concomitants and causes of the cases studied. We have tried to project the rising trend of suicides in Punjab in the context of emerging crisis of agrarian transformation in an earlier section. In this section we shall examine the causes of suicide, as reported by close relatives of the suicide victims, in terms of interface of socio-economic and psychological factors.

Table - 6.1
REPORTED CAUSES OF SUICIDE

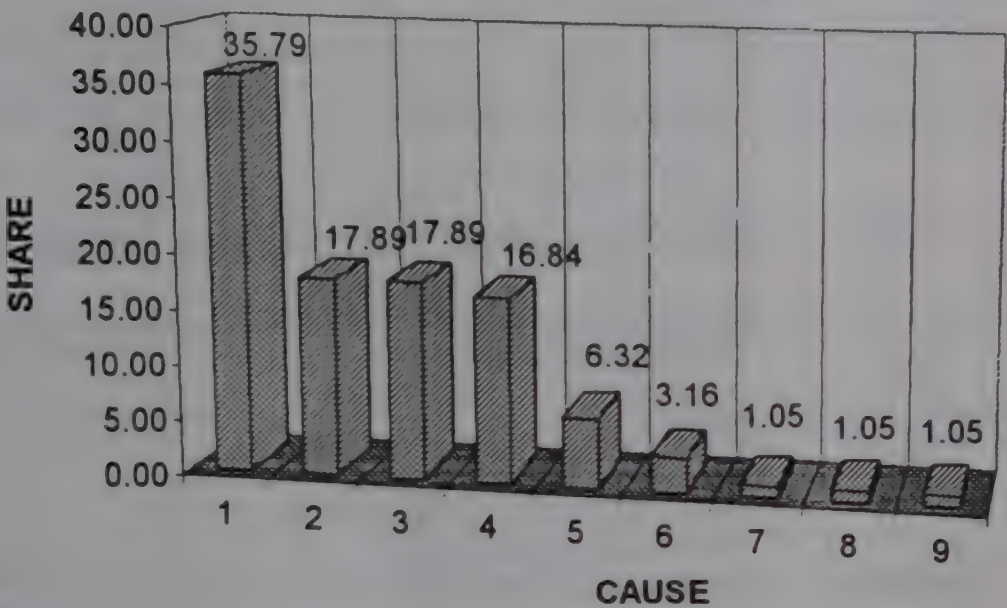
Causes	PERCENTAGE
Family discord	35.79
Alcohol and illicit drug use	17.89
Indebtedness	17.89
Loss of status	16.84
Lack of resources	6.32
Death of a family member	3.16
Quarrel with in-laws	1.05
Impotency	1.05
Crop failure	1.05

Note: Many respondents reported more than one cause

Several causes were reported by the close relatives of suicide victims while answering the question why did the victim commit suicide? Notably, most of the respondents, almost 90 per cent, reported not a single cause but multiple causes.

Graph -6.1

DIFFERENT CAUSES RESPONSIBLE FOR SUICIDE



CODES	EXPLANATION
1	Family discord
2	Alcohol and illicit drug use
3	Indebtedness
4	Loss of status
5	Lack of resources
6	Death of a family member
7	Quarrel with in-laws
8	Impotency
9	Crop failure

Among the various causes reported by the respondents, domestic discord topped the lists followed by alcohol and drug abuse, indebtedness and status loss (Table 6.1).

DOMESTIC DISCORD

Recurrent quarrel in the family was one of the most commonly reported causes of suicide. More than three-fourths of the suicide victims were reported to have had relations of discord in their families (table 6.2).

Table - 6.2
SUICIDE VICTIMS WITH FAMILY DISCORD

Family discord	Percentage
Yes	77.40
No	22.6

Table - 6.3
RELATIONS WITH WHOM THE SUICIDE VICTIM WAS HAVING DISCORD

Relations	Percentage
Wife	37.76
Brothers and parents	22.60
Not applicable	22.60
In-laws	11.30
In-laws and wife	3.80
Children	1.90

About 38 per cent had relations of discord with wife, 27 per cent with parents or brothers and 11 per cent with in-laws (Table 6.3). Only in one case, there was evidence of conflict with children. Relations of discord with affinal kins thus account for a larger percentage of cases than discord with blood relatives.

The pre-eminence of domestic discord is further reinforced by another fact i.e. precedence of family quarrel before suicide in one-third of the cases. In a majority of the cases it was quarrel with the wife, followed by quarrel with parents. Here again conjugal conflict outscored the cases of conflict with blood relations (See table 6.4).

Table - 6.4
PRECEDENCE OF DOMESTIC DISCORD IN SUICIDE CASES

Response	Percentage
No discord reported	67.9
Party to discord	32.1
Quarrel with wife	15.2
Quarrel with parents	9.4
Quarrel with in-laws	3.7
Quarrel with children	1.9
Quarrel with wife and in-laws	1.9

As important as the strain in the family relationships there is also a problem about stressful family liability on the suicide victim.

Table - 6.5
STRESSFUL LIABILITIES IN SUICIDE CASES AND GENERAL SAMPLE

Category	Presence of stressful liabilities	No stressful liabilities
Suicide victims	73.6	26.4
General category	42.0	58.0

When asked about the presence of stressful liabilities it was discovered that as many as 74 per cent suicide victims had such liabilities on them. (See Table 6.5). This further gains in salience when compared with the presence of such liabilities in only 42 per cent of the general sample.

Prominent among the stressful liabilities were delay in marriage of children, inability to bear the burden of education of the children, inability to pay dowry, financial difficulties in meeting day-to-day expenses.

ALCOHOL AND ILLICIT DRUG USE

Alcohol and drug abuse was another important cause of suicide reported by 18 per cent of the respondents. It may be recalled that in our study 68 per cent of the suicide victims were regular alcohol users and 26 per cent were illicit drug users, as reported in the section dealing with the

distinctive features of suicide victims. It was as well noted that the incidence of the use of alcohol and drugs was higher among the suicide victims than respondents of the general sample. The regular and heavy use of alcohol by suicide victims was also discovered in numerous case studies. The case of suicide by a person in Mehalghela village (Nawanshahr district) is illustrative of it. According to the villagers, he was an alcoholic as he used to drink heavily everyday. For this very reason, he developed strained relations with his father. Following a quarrel with his father on his habit of drinking, in a fit of anger he committed suicide by jumping in a well.

INDEBTEDNESS

Indebtedness was as well reported as a cause of suicide by 18 per cent of the close relatives of the victims. According to the field data, about 41 per cent of the victims were under debt. However, a comparison of the debt status of the suicide victims with that of the general sample reveals that far more respondents of the general sample i.e. 71 per cent, were under debt (See table 6.6). This seems to suggest that even as debt was reported as a cause of suicide for one-third of the victims.

Debt was identified as a cause of suicide in a number of case studies. To cite one here, a person committed suicide by consuming pesticides in 1998 in Longowal Khurd village (Gurdaspur district). He was reported to have incurred a heavy debt, though the exact amount of the debt was not revealed. In 1994, there was division of land in the family and only two acres came to his share. He had also to shoulder the responsibility of his sister's marriage as his brothers did not cooperate. For this purpose he had to sell five kanals of his land and had also to raise some loan. He could not

return the loan but had to borrow more for meeting the needs of his family. His child was expelled from school for non-payment of fees. His sister paid the fees and got him readmitted. The victim's friends reported that this depressed him so much that he killed himself the next day. As this was not enough, his wife followed suit by killing her 10-months-old son and herself. All this due to indebtedness.

In respect of debt, it was further observed that productive assets such as tractor and other farm machinery acquired through loans were eventually sold off to fulfil unproductive needs.

Table - 6.6
INDEBTEDNESS AMONG SUICIDE CASES AND GENERAL SAMPLE

Category	Suicide victims N=53	General sample
Indebted	41.50	71.40
Not under debt	51.00	28.60
Not applicable (females)	7.50	

Table - 6.7
PERCENTAGE OF SUICIDE VICTIMS WHO SOLD THEIR LANDS

Status	Percentage
Not applicable (landless)	49.00
Not sold	45.30
Land sold	5.70

probe into the effect of indebtedness on land alienation reveals that only per cent of the suicide victims had to sell land under the burden of debt (table 6.7). This is hardly surprising in view of the fact that the decision to sell land is always a hard one in village life, as it is generally resented by family and leads to status loss of the seller in the eyes of the community. This comes out clearly from the case studies as well. In every case it was resented by the family of the victim and resulted in disastrous consequences. In order to ascertain the role of social support systems in

rescuing a person from debt, an attempt was made to find out whether the suicide victims sought help of kinsmen and friends to repay the loan.

Table - 6.8
SOURCES APPROACHED FOR REPAYMENT OF LOAN

Sources	Percentage
Relatives	20.8
Friends	9.4
Not applicable	69.8

The data show evidence of about one-third suicide victims having sought such help. Twenty-one per cent sought the help of relatives while 9.4 per cent sought the help of friends.

Table - 6.9
FINANCIAL HELP RECEIVED FOR REPAYMENT OF LOAN

Category	Received help	Not referred help	Not applicable
Suicide victims	1.9	28.3	69.8
General sample	16.0	5.9	70.1

It is distressing to note, however, that in the case of 15 out of 16 victims who sought help from relatives and friends such help never came forth. Neither the relatives nor the friends came forward to the rescue of the suicide victims to enable them to repay the loans. In contrast, in the general sample, help was received from relatives and friends in 19 out of 26 cases (Table 6.9). This underlines the critical importance of social support system in influencing suicide. The availability of social support in times of need may prevent suicide while non-availability of it may induce it.

MULTIPLE CAUSES OF SUICIDES

A large number of respondents reported more than one cause for the case of suicide in their family. An analysis of their responses has yielded certain meaningful combinations of factors which offer perceptive insights into

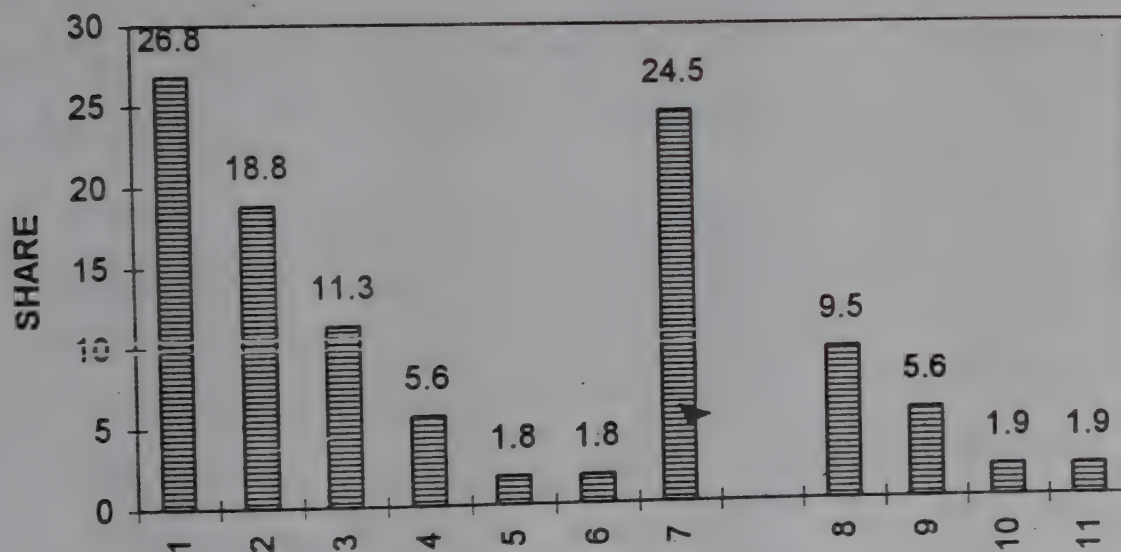
the nature of multiple causation. Domestic discord, alcohol and drug abuse, and indebtedness account for more than one-fourth of the cases (Table 6.10). Next in order is the combination of domestic discord and alcohol and drug abuse which accounts for nearly one-fifth of the cases of suicide.

Table - 6.10
MULTIPLE CAUSES OF SUICIDES

Causes	Percentages
Domestic discord+Alcohol and drug abuse+Indebtedness	26.8
Domestic discord + Alcohol and drug abuse	18.8
Domestic discord + Indebtedness + Loss of Status	11.3
Mental disorder + Alcohol and drug abuse	5.6
Death of dear one + Domestic discord	1.8
Impotency +Alcohol and drug abuse+ loss of status	1.8
Not exactly known	24.5
Exclusive cause	9.5
Domestic discord	5.6
Indebtedness	1.9
Alcohol and drug abuse	1.9

Graph -6.2

DIFFERENT MULTIPLE CAUSES SHARE IN SUICIDES



Different multiple causes

1. Domestic discord+alcohol and drug abuse+indebtedness
2. Domestic discord+alcohol and drug abuse
3. Domestic discord+indebtedness+loss of status
4. Mental disorder+alcohol and drug abuse
5. Death of dear one +domestic discord
6. Impotency+alcohol and drug abuse+loss of status
7. Not exactly known
8. Exclusive cause
9. Domestic discord
10. indebtedness
11. alcohol and drug abuse

This is followed by a combination of domestic discord-cum-indebtedness-cum-status loss which is applicable in 11 per cent of the cases. Taken together, the above indicated combinations account for 57 per cent of the cases.

Another point to note is that both domestic discord and alcohol and drug abuse figure in four of the five combinations which shows their primary significance for suicide. Indebtedness follows them as it figures in two major combinations including the leading one, which means that it is also of critical importance.

Yet another curious point to observe in the above table is that in nearly one-quarter of the cases the cause of suicide was reported to be not exactly known. This is suggestive of the suicide victim's lack of trust in his family, as also of the apathetic ignorance of the family about the state of mind of the suicide victim. Whatever the reason, this apathy on the part of the family of the victim is really appalling.

INTERFACE OF FACTORS OF SUICIDE

An analysis of the interface between social, economic and psychological factors has shown how these factors impinge upon each other. For instance, alcohol and illicit drug use by the suicide victim was reported as a cause of domestic discord by about one-fourth of the respondents. This clearly shows how alcohol and drug abuse vitiate family peace.

Table - 6.11
REASONS OF DISCORD IN SUICIDE VICTIMS' FAMILIES

Reasons	Percentage
Alcohol and illicit drug use	22.60
Excess expenditure	20.80
Parents' authoritarianism	17.00
Intervention by in-laws	7.50
Land sale	3.80
Children's demands	1.90
Not exactly known	3.80
Not applicable	22.60

The unwholesome effects of regular and heavy use of alcohol on family harmony are further brought out by several case studies. To cite one such case, look at the suicide committed by a 25-year-old driver of Mehal Kalan village in Sangrur district. He was reported to be a regular and heavy drinker and used to spend a major portion of his income on liquor. This became a constant irritant in his relations with his wife causing a perpetual conflict between them. Unable to bear the agony, his wife went back to her parents. A day before he committed suicide, he went to his in-laws and had a severe quarrel with them on the issue of his drinking for which reason his wife refused to go with him. On returning home alone, he had a heavy drink and committed suicide the following day by consuming poison.

A number of case studies as well reveal how several suicide victims resorted to regular and heavy drinking and drug abuse on account of recurrent family clash.

Similarly, an analysis of the effects of indebtedness on the family shows that in 36 per cent of the cases, indebtedness had led to family discord (See Table 6.12).

Table - 6.12
IMPACT OF INDEBTEDNESS ON FAMILY HARMONY

Category	Suicide victims	General category
Adverse Effect on Family harmony	35.80	23.50
No Effect	5.70	47.90
Not Applicable (Landless)	58.50	28.60

A larger percentage of the close relatives of the suicide victims (36 per cent) than the respondents of the general sample reported unwholesome effects of indebtedness on family harmony. This combination of indebtedness and family discord paved the way for several suicides.

PREDISPOSING AND PRECIPITATING FACTORS

Suicide is generally believed to be an impulsive act. In actual fact, this is not so. More often than not, it is a well thought out decision. It is easy to blame the last provocation as the "cause" of the suicide but the fact remains that things had been going wrong in the life of such an individual for a long time and his mental resources to cope with the stresses were getting depleted. In the light of this knowledge, it is important to distinguish between predisposing and precipitating factors of suicide.

For sure, it is not possible to advance a foolproof list of predisposing and precipitating factors. Such a specification will always be contextual. A factor which serves as a predisposing factor in one case may turn into a

precipitating factor in another and vice-versa. Yet, a tentative identification may be of some analytical value.

In the light of the findings, it appears that chronic domestic discord, regular and heavy use of alcohol and illicit drugs, cumulative debt and social isolation served as predisposing factors in most of the cases. Moreover, casual family clash, sense of humiliation, injured self-esteem and loss of near and dear ones generally served as precipitating factors. This comes out clearly from the case studies. Take, for example, the case of suicide by a labourer in Chotian village, Sangrur district. Refusal of his in-laws to send his wife along with him was reported by family members as cause of the suicide. A deeper probe, however, revealed a number of factors such as his reported impotency, death of his father, 15 days before the event, estrangement with in-laws and chronic domestic discord in the family. The refusal by his in-laws to send his wife, it seems, served as a precipitating factor in that it injured his self-esteem. Without the background of the other factors revealed by our deeper probe, his in-laws' refusal alone might not have prompted him to commit suicide. Hence the significance of the predisposing factors.

In another case, a farmer of Sakrodi village committed suicide after killing his wife and son following a quarrel with the wife on the issue of selling land. Deeper investigations brought to light a host of factors including his prolonged estrangement with his wife, the burden of debt, treacherous behaviour of the brothers to get their shares in the land but not to share the burden of debt which he incurred to cultivate that land, his habit of regular and heavy drinking, and his status loss in the village of which he had been the Sarpanch for quite some time. All these factors constitute

predisposing factors in the absence of which the clash with his wife on the sale of land alone would not have resulted in the tragedy.

PEOPLES' PERCEPTION

The perceived reality may be at variance with the objective reality. In influencing human behaviour, however, it is the perceived reality that matters more than the objective reality. Guided by these considerations, we tried to know about the people's perception in respect of the incidence and causes of suicides in Punjab and their suggestions to overcome the problem.

As a matter of fact, we were surprised to note that a number of cases of suicide reported as such in the list that we had with us were reported by the people as cases of accidental deaths. There are thus varying perceptions about the incidence of suicide. Yet there is also evidence of increasing awareness among the people about the rise in the incidence of suicide.

When asked about their views regarding the causes of the current spurt in suicides, 28 per cent of the respondents accorded first priority to alcohol and drug abuse, closely followed by indebtedness (26 per cent) and domestic discord (20 per cent). Thus about two-thirds of the respondents accorded first priority to these three causes. It is interesting that crop failure, burden of ceremonies and dowry, loss of prestige and mental illness did not figure at all among the first ranking causes.

Domestic discord emerged at the top among the second ranking causes reported by 32 per cent, followed by indebtedness (14 per cent) and crop damage.

Third priority was accorded to crop failure (20 per cent), drug addiction (14 per cent), poverty (12 per cent) and loss of prestige (12 per cent) as the causes of suicide.

The message of the above analysis is that the prominent causes of suicide as perceived by the people are : alcohol and drug abuse, indebtedness and domestic discord. These are the same causes as those which reportedly led our victims to commit suicide. Only the order of priority of the two is somewhat different. Further, as in reported causes so in perceived causes : multiple causation rather than single factor causation holds the key.

It may also be added here that we discovered some area specific causes in the course of our field visit. In Bangan village, for example, we were told by the respondents that the village had been facing the problem of crop damage for the last five years due to floods caused by a barrage constructed in the neighbouring area of Haryana, which in the rainy season diverted the waters of Ghaggar river towards Bangan and other villages, submerging their fields. The loss of crops year after year is reported to have thrown the farmers of the village in a perpetually increasing debt trap and consequent increase in the cases of suicide. According to the villagers they had repeatedly brought this to the notice of the government, but in vain, as the government is reportedly not paying any attention to their grievance because Bangan falls in the category of the villages which may eventually have to be transferred by Punjab to Haryana on the settlement of the territorial dispute.

On being asked whether they approved of suicide as an escape route, most of the respondents (86 per cent) did not approve of it. They regarded it as an act of cowardice. In fact, they showed scant regard for the victims of suicide. Struggle is the name of game called life, according to several

respondents. Anybody who runs away from it deserves no sympathy said many of them.

Table - 6.13
APPROVAL/DISAPPROVAL OF SUICIDE BY THE GENERAL
SAMPLE

Response	Percentage
Disapproved suicide as an escape route	86.00
Approved suicide as an escape route	4.00
No Response	10.00

In response to the question how can the problem of suicide be solved, 34 per cent of the respondents pleaded for sympathetic attitude on the part of the government towards the farmers, whatever that means. 22 per cent proposed a ban on drugs and setting-up of drug de-addiction centres and 16 per cent recommended compensation for the affected families. Appropriate treatment facilities and crop insurance were also suggested by a few as measures to combat the menace of suicide.

The above listed measures suggested by the respondents can be classified into two sets which for want of better terms may be called preventive measures and relief measures. Ban on drugs and setting up of de-addiction centres, provision of treatment facilities etc. fall in the former category while the remaining ones belong to the latter category.

In the course of field visits, we discovered that there was difference of opinion among the villagers about relief measures, particularly compensation. Many people were not in favour of providing compensation. Firstly, because it would amount to incentivising cowardice which will give a wrong signal to the people. In fact, we had occasions to

ar people say that it would be unfair to those who are keeping their spirits high in the struggle for life. Secondly, it may also encourage people end the lives of the unwanted family members particularly the aged ones who are perceived as a liability on the family, declaring it a suicide. The suggestion of compensation has, therefore, to be taken with a pinch of salt.

EFFECTS OF SUICIDE ON THE FAMILY

Table - 6.14
EFFECTS OF SUICIDE ON THE FAMILY

Effect	Percentage
Sense of insecurity	52.8
Social stigmatization	19.9
Fear + No reliable source of income	13.2
Intense fear	9.4
Reduced income	3.8
Reduced income + stigmatization	1.9

surprisingly, more than 50 per cent of the respondents reported that they were suffering from a sense of economic insecurity. One-fifth of the respondents were bothered by the social stigmatization of the family. Ten per cent stated that they were suffering from a feeling of intense fear. On deeper probe, majority of the respondents described how the children were frightened, how some of them lost their sleep, how the families kept their doors shut, and how they suffered the burden of isolation and stigmatization.

In order to go deeper into the psychological effects of suicide, an attempt was made to assess the psychological health of the members of the affected families by means of two psychological tests namely, PGI N-2 Questionnaire (Verma and Wig, 1976) and Suicide Intent Test (Gupta,

Anand and Trivedi, 1983). These tests were also administered to the respondents of the general sample so as to have a comparative view of the psychological health of the affected families and that of the respondents of general sample

The results on both these psychological tests reveal that the families of the suicide victims show a much greater degree of psychological disturbances as compared to other normal families.

Table - 6.15
MENTAL HEALTH AND SUICIDE INTENT TEST RESULTS

	Family members of suicide victims N = 53	General sample N = 119	Statistical significant test
Average Score on PGINQ N2	32.28	15.47	Significant at .01 level
Average score on suicide intent test	6.16	2.14	Significant at .01 level

As shown in the above table there is a clearly significant difference between the two samples. However, interpretation of the results is a bit difficult. It can mean two things. Either that the suicide victims come from psychologically more disturbed families or it may mean that after the event of suicide in the family, the members have become psychologically more disturbed. It is also possible that both the factors are operating in these families.

While so much is being talked about the recent "wave" of suicides, very little attention is being paid to the affected families who have suffered the loss. There are no facilities for the support of these families by way of psychological counselling or psychiatric treatment. These families deserve to be treated in the same way, as other victims of natural disasters like earthquake, floods and fires.

The above analysis of the reported causes and consequences reveals that;

- no single factor could explain the suicide cases;
- in most of the cases multiple causes were reported;
- domestic discord, alcohol and drug abuse and indebtedness emerged as the leading factors of suicide;
- the interface of socio-economic and psychological factors provided better insights into the cases of suicide;
- chronic domestic discord, regular and heavy abuse of drugs, cumulative debt and social isolation tend to emerge as predisposing factors, while family clash, sense of humiliation, injured self-esteem and loss of near and dear ones appeared as precipitating factors;
- the phenomenon of suicide has not entered the perception of the villagers, as much as it has been highlighted by the press and the media;
- alcohol and drug abuse, indebtedness and domestic discord, in that order, emerged as the perceived causes of suicide by the villagers;
- an overwhelming majority of the villagers disapproved of suicide as an escape route; and
- families of suicide victims were found to be suffering from a sense of insecurity and fear as well as severe psychological disturbance

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SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A. BACKGROUND

The increase in the rate of suicides among farmers in Punjab should be understood in the background of the crisis of agrarian transformation. The crisis has penetrated into different facets of rural life. It cannot be termed as merely an agricultural crisis. It is a crisis of overall stagnation of the economy, decline in peasant movements, retrogressive social practices and conspicuous consumption, rising unemployment and inequalities. The background factors which have contributed to the crisis of the agrarian society are :

- (i) Economic development as reflected in commercialisation of agriculture lacked inner dynamism for building up inter-sectoral linkages, sharpened economic inequalities in the rural society and caused environmental degradation. It is evident from the decline in the productivity levels of different crops. A significant fact is that stagnation in agriculture is adversely affecting the rural economy of Punjab. It has resulted in pauperization of the under-privileged strata of the peasantry.
- (ii) There has been a decline in the share of landless labourers and small and marginal farmers in asset and income distribution.
- (iii) The burden of debt is also high among the small and marginal farmers. The liability in the form of debt of small and marginal

farmers is to the extent of Rs. 1229.58 crore i.e. 21.5 per cent of the total debt. Per acre debt is the highest among the small farmers (Rs. 10105/-), whereas debt in the case of large farmer is Rs. 4230/-. It is also interesting to note that the greater proportion of the debt of the small and marginal farmers originated from loans taken for non-productive purposes.

(iv) The green revolution did not create necessary conditions and sufficient opportunities of employment. Unemployment is concentrated in the low income group. More than 65 per cent of the educated unemployed youth belong to families with income less than Rs. 2000/-. The total number of educated unemployed persons in Punjab, as on the live register of employment exchange in 1996 was 58 per cent of the total number of unemployed persons. A sense of insecurity and frustration is seizing a substantial number of the rural youth and in the absence of any alternative, some of them are seeking escape routes.

(v) It is not to suggest that the small and marginal peasants and even the landless labourers did not benefit from the trickle-down effect of the green revolution. But, they had to pay a heavy social price. In a caste-ridden milieu, the penetration of consumerism and its demonstration, in terms of conspicuous consumption and widespread effects of dowry constrained the capacity of these

sections to improve their quality of life. For instance, dowry exchange also adversely affected the small and marginal farmers. Dowry harassment (47%) and dowry death (45%) cases were higher in this section. Sixty-eight per cent of the suicide victims' families have debt on them because of unproductive expenditure as compared to 20 per cent of the general households. The incidence of drug abuse is very high, amongst these farmers particularly in suicide prone districts of Sangrur, Bathinda, Mansa and Firozepur. These factors have provided the necessary conditions for an increase in suicides in Punjab. Economic development and 10 years of turmoil have fractured the village community - its traditional institutions, authority system and normative patterns. All has aggravated the tensions in the rural Punjab.

- B.** The following are the main trends in so far as incidents of suicides are concerned;
- (i) The suicide rate is steadily increasing all over India and Punjab is no exception to this general trend. The major share of this increase in the suicide rate, however, goes mainly to Kerala, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Tripura, Goa, West Bengal, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh.
 - (ii) There has been a sharp increase in the suicide rate in Punjab which coincides with the post-terrorism phase. The increase was nominal

between 1988-91, was moderate between 1991-92, whereas it registered a steep increase from 1993 onwards which broadly coincided with the post-terrorism phase.

- (iii) The geo-cultural spread of incidence of the suicide in Punjab clearly reflects these to be located in the Malwa districts (specifically the districts of Sangrur, Bathinda, Firozpur, Mansa and Faridkot) and in the border districts of Amritsar and Gurdaspur. In fact the percentage share of the six districts of Sangrur, Bathinda, Mansa, Amritsar, Firozpur and Gurdaspur constitute more than 72 per cent of the total suicides in Punjab from 1988 to 1997.
- (iv) The macro data show that the percentage share of farmers' suicides to the total suicides in the state between 1991-97 is to the extent of 23 per cent. The percentage share of the farmers to non-farmers suicide is low in all the districts except Sangrur. However, the suicide rate (i.e. per lakh population) of the farmers as compared with non-farmers is very high.
- (v) The districts with high proneness to farmers' suicide in Punjab are Sangrur and Bathinda. The moderate districts in this respect are Firozpur, Mansa, Faridkot, Amritsar and Gurdaspur. It is disturbing that Sangrur has registered such a high suicide rate i.e.

12.08 and has a share of 44 per cent of the total suicides in the state between 1991-97.

(vi) Many analysts have reported that there has been a spate of suicides because of crop failures or crop damage. Monthly spread of suicide in Punjab in a 10 year span of 1988-98 reflects that the suicides to be well dispersed throughout the whole year. Therefore, it would be difficult to attribute macro causal explanations to suicides like crop failure etc.

(vii) A comparison of the all-India and Punjab figures on the means of suicide confirms that the cases of suicide by consuming pesticides are twice as many in Punjab as at the all-India level.

C. The following are the main characteristic features of the suicide victims.

i) Majority of suicide victims were drawn from landless labourers, small and marginal farmers.

ii) A substantial number of these were illiterate or educated up to the primary level.

iii) Youth in the age group of 15-29 constitute a substantial number of suicide victims

iv) Suicide victims were loners.

v) Many of them were desperate seekers of doles and gratification

vi) Suicide victims were reported to be heavy drinkers, a majority of them chronic ones. This is a very significant finding as

alcoholism has been described as "chronic suicide." Twenty-six per cent of the suicide victims were reported to be illicit drug users.

D. The following were the pre-suicide behavioural manifestation of suicide victims;

- i) A vast majority of the persons who committed suicide had gross psychological symptoms a few days before their death. These symptoms include depression, anxiety, insomnia, irritability — aggression and social withdrawal.
- ii) Almost one-fifth of the cases gave clear indications that they might commit suicide.
- iii) Majority of suicide victims were having long standing psychological stress. The presence of psychological stressful events was significantly higher among them compared with the general sample.

E. MULTI-FACTORS RESPONSIBLE FOR SUICIDES

- (i) There was no single factor which caused suicides. In most of the cases multiple causes were reported. Domestic discord, alcohol and drug abuse and indebtedness emerged as the leading factors of suicide.
- (ii) No case of suicide could be fully explained in terms of precipitating factor only. There are several predisposing factors in every case.

Prominent among these were chronic domestic discord, regular and heavy use of alcohol and drugs, cumulative debt and social isolation. The factors that served as precipitating included casual family clash, sense of humiliation, injured self esteem and loss of near and dear ones.

- F. The phenomenon of suicide has not entered the perception of the villagers as much as it is highlighted in the press and the media. An overwhelming majority of the villagers disapprove of suicide as an escape route.

RECOMMENDATIONS

There is need for formulating a new set of policies which can help create conditions conducive to harmonious social and economic existence. There has to be a multi-pronged interventions including a package for providing relief to the families of suicide victims, restructuring the economy to generate more employment opportunities and bring about a qualitative improvement in the social development index.

The following are some of the recommendations for providing relief to the suicide victims' families.

A. RELIEF PACKAGE FOR THE SUICIDE VICTIMS' FAMILIES

1. Monetary assistance for setting up self-employment ventures on a priority basis to mitigate the sense of economic insecurity of the affected families;
2. Dependent aged, women and children should be provided with monetary relief such as old-age pension (relaxation of the age limit), wage employment on compassionate grounds, subsidised education.
3. Psychiatric assistance to the suicide victims' families to cope with stress and depression.
4. Family and career counselling facilities.
5. Efforts should be made to sensitize the community not to stigmatize the suicide victim's family, rather initiate rehabilitative and integrative programmes.

B. PREVENTIVE MEASURES

Punjab's economy needs a quantum jump. About 84 per cent of its geographical area is under cultivation – the national average being 43 per cent is experiencing a decline in crop productivity and diminishing returns from fragmented holdings. Efforts should be made to strengthen the forward and backward linkages of the economy. The following are some of the recommendations for restructuring the economy of Punjab which shall mitigate unemployment, augment income and reduce inequalities.

1. The evidence collected in the study indicates that short-term credit is used for unproductive purposes which contribute to an increase in the farmers' stress. Therefore, there is need for providing mechanisms for meeting social consumption requirements of the farmers. A farmers' provident fund scheme should be initiated to meet their social consumption needs like marriages, medical treatment, death, household consumption items (to be specified from time to time). The farmer's contribution should be matched by the government.

The mechanism for the collection of the farmer's contribution can be in the form of a cess levied on the seller(i.e. the farmer) to be collected along with the market fees. The amount of the cess shall be matched by the government. The co-operative bank may be made the nodal agency. At the village level, the scheme should be implemented through primary agriculture cooperative societies.

An expert group having representatives of the Provident Fund Commissioner, Agricultural Department, Co-operative Department and the bank may be constituted.

2. Income can be augmented with efficient use of land, water, electricity, fertiliser and other inputs. The Punjab Agricultural University (PAU), through its extension department, should prepare area specific packages and launch an awareness campaign in the villages.
3. A credit card scheme for farmers may be introduced in the suicide-prone districts in the first phase on an experimental basis. MARKFED should be assigned the task of opening multi-input shops at the block level. The credit card should be honoured at these outlets.
4. Creation of common assets like storage facilities, farm machinery like tractors in the co-operative sector with the help of the National Co-operative Development Corporation (NCDC). This will help improve technological efficiency. For instance, tractors are used only at 30 per cent efficiency in Punjab.
5. An area specific and target group focused credit policy should be evolved. For instance, a credit policy may be formulated for Bathinda, Faridkot, Sangrur and Mansa in view of the specific needs of the area and those of the small and marginal farmers.
6. A special assistance programme for crop failure, crop damage and crop diversification should be drawn up. The ex-gratia scheme implemented by the Punjab Mandi Board needs to be strengthened and broad-based.
7. A flood control programme should be prepared for the flood-prone areas. The maximum limit of the compensation may be raised to Rs. 1 lakh.

For restructuring of the agriculture sector, we are reproducing the suggestions made by G.S. Bhalla, Gurmail Singh in a study on Impact of GATT on Punjab Agriculture, at the Institute for Development and Communication, Chandigarh.

1. Diversification of crops : exploration of export market

The role of farmers' cooperatives, trade and private traders in procurement, storing and trading of these commodities for both the domestic and export market should be strengthened.

It will be essential to diversify crop production in a big way to give a boost to agricultural exports from Punjab. Crop diversification as well as diversification to animal husbandry and fisheries will also require large investment in technological improvements.

There exist large opportunities for the export of superior quality of rice as well as certain special qualities of wheat. In wheat increasing area should be brought under the Durum wheat and in the case of paddy, cultivation of Basmati variety ought to be encouraged. Local trading houses and farmers' cooperatives need to be encouraged for popularising these varieties for exports and research should be directed towards evolving high yielding superior varieties of rice crop and for retaining and further developing more aromatic varieties of Basmati.

There exist bright prospects for the export of high value crops like flowers, fruit, vegetables, mushrooms, animal husbandry products, poultry products and fisheries. Diversification through these crops should be through vertical integration of production, processing and marketing.

Appropriate institutions like farmers' cooperatives, trading houses and export houses and market intelligence agencies should be organised for augmenting agricultural exports.

2. Contract farming

Besides farmers' cooperatives contract farming seems to be an appropriate institution for agricultural diversification and for augmenting exports.

Contract farming between farmers and exporters and/or processors could prove beneficial in the case of the highly perishable crops such as fruits, vegetables and flowers. However, so far only large farmers seem to be involved in contract farming. Steps have to be taken to ensure that small and marginal farmers also benefit from this arrangement.

3. Technology

Along with appropriate institutional framework including land relations and a highly developed rural infrastructure in irrigation, rural electrification, roads and communication, markets and credit and research etc., it was the introduction of new Borlaug Seed fertilizer technology that put Punjab agriculture on a higher path of growth. The opportunities from trade liberalisation can also be exploited by undertaking further investment in new technology. This is important for reducing production costs and for obtaining a quantum jump in production through the introduction of new biotechnological innovations. Large investment in technological research and its upgradation would be needed not only for

increasing the yield of the existing crops to meet the increasing food demand but also for diversification of crops towards horticulture and animal husbandry.

There is need for strengthening the public research system including the Indian Council of Agriculture Research and the agricultural universities. Much higher investment in research and development and in extension has become essential to counteract the likely adverse impact of patents rights contained in the GATT provision of Trade Related Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS). Public research would have to be strengthened with a view to enabling the small and marginal farmers to avail themselves of new technological developments.

4. **Agro-processing***

With a view to realising better returns to the farmers and accelerating development of Punjab's economy, immediate steps should be taken to encourage agro-processing and agro input industries that have maximum forward and backward linkage with other sectors/sub-sectors of the state economy.

The following industries seem to have good potential for development and should be put on the priority list:

Category A

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|--------------------|------------------------------|
| 1. Dairy products | 9. Blankets, shawls, carpets |
| 2. Bakery products | 10. Pulp, paper and related |

* For detail recommendations see, H.S. Shergill and Gurmail Singh (1994), Scope of Agro-Processing Industries in Punjab, Mimeo Institute for Development and Communication, Chandigarh.

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|---|--|
| 3. Animal and poultry feed | 11. products |
| 4. Liquor, malt and malt products | 12. Tanning and preparation of leather |
| 5. Cotton spinning | 13. Leather footwear |
| 6. Weaving and finishing of cotton textiles | 14. Other related products |
| 7. Textile garments | 15. Animal meat |
| 8. Knitted cotton textile products | 16. Poultry meat |
| | 17. Egg powder etc. |

Category B

- | | |
|---|--------------------------------------|
| 1. Hydrogenated oils & Vanaspati. | 6. Wool spinning and weaving. |
| 2. Other edible oils. | 7. Knitting cotton products. |
| 3. Sugar. | 8. Thread and thread products. |
| 4. Canning and preservation of fruits and vegetables. | 9. Container boxes and preparations. |
| 5. Wool cleaning etc. | 10. Starch and starch products. |

5. Sustainability of irrigation system

For long-term sustainability of the present irrigation system, the lifeline of Punjab agriculture, some control on over-exploitation of underground water needs to be initiated. For that purpose, a policy needs to be initiated for increasing conjunctive use of surface water, use of water economising techniques and development of

less water intensive crops or varieties of crops currently cultivated in Punjab.

6. Institutional credit

There is need for further expansion of institutional credit to agriculture in Punjab. The need has become all the more important in the context of diversification towards high value crops and setting up of agro-processing industries. Indiscriminatory waiving of loans should be discouraged as it adversely affects the recovery of outstanding credit as well as the long-term viability of these cooperative credit and other financial institutions.

7. Post-harvest technology

There is need for developing port facilities and bulk handling facilities at Kandla for the export of rice and wheat. Specialised facilities like processing and canning, refrigerated trucks, roads, railways and air transport network and handling facilities at ports would have to be developed to facilitate export of perishable commodities like fresh fruits, vegetables, meat, eggs, poultry and fisheries.

To sum up, the state will have to take numerous steps like investment in technology, development of infrastructure and provision of appropriate institutional structure for promotion of cooperative and private initiative with a view to diversification of its agriculture and rapid development of agro-processing in the state.

Recommendation for Accelerating Social Development

It has been argued that suicides are a multi-causal phenomenon and social factors have a primacy of a sort. Therefore, emphasis must be laid on improving the social development index in rural Punjab.

1. Literacy and vocational education plan

It has been observed that the area which is most affected by suicides has registered a low literacy rate. Interestingly, the suicide victims include a large number of illiterates. Therefore, there is need for accelerating the literacy campaign accompanied by skill based education in Sangrur, Bathinda, Mansa and Faridkot.

A special literacy and vocational education plan should be prepared

2. Strengthening of Self-Employment Programmes

A special plan for self-employment of women and unemployed youths among the small and marginal farmers and landless labourers should be evolved. Self-employment ventures should be identified to suit the aptitude of the beneficiaries and availability of raw material, market and the profit margin.

3. (i) Checking Drug Abuse and Alcoholism

Alcohol and drug abuse particularly among the youth should be contained. The community has to be made aware of the material and human cost of alcoholism and drug abuse borne by society, the family and the individual and the extent to which it diverts resources from education and human resource development.

Human resource development needs to be the main thrust which would undermine the culture of habitual drinking.

- (ii) Drug de-addiction centres should be set up at the block level in a phased manner. In the first phase the districts of Bathinda, Faridkot, Sangrur and Mansa and in the second phase the districts of Amritsar, Firozpur and Gurdaspur should be provided with drug de-addiction centres.

4. Activisation of Support Structures

Activisation of support structures like panchayats and mahilla mandals. These should be empowered to take steps to;

- (i) check the use of alcohol and illicit drug use;
- (ii) establish, regulate and monitor drug de-addiction centres;
- (iii) introduce safety provision in the use of pesticides;
- (iv) take action against violators of the Dowry Act etc.

5. Facilities for mental health care

The study has found that a large number of people who committed suicide had shown emotional and psychological disturbances when they attempted suicide. As a preventive measure it is recommended that mental health treatment and care facilities to be provided at the district and sub-district level. In the beginning the medical doctors and health staff working in the suicide prone districts may be imparted psychiatric training in early recognition and management of these cases.

ADMINISTRATIVE MEASURES

1. A committee should be set up to suggest a programme of action specially focused on the problems of small and marginal farmers, landless labourers and the youth. The terms of reference of this committee may include the following;
 - (i) To suggest concrete steps to augment the income of small and marginal farmers and landless labourers.
 - (ii) To formulate concrete steps for creating wage employment, self-employment and skill development for the youth.
2. An expert group should be set up to formulate area development plans for Sangrur, Bathinda, Faridkot and Mansa districts which are highly prone to suicides. The terms of reference of this expert group may include the following;
 - (i) To formulate an overall plan of action including infrastructure development like health and education, identification of agro-based industries and other economic activities, recreational facilities, special package for reducing the economic burden of the vulnerable sections, to check illicit drug use and alcoholism.
 - (ii) To plan setting up of family, health and career counselling centres.
 - (iii) To develop a multi-sectoral welfare plan for the target group.
3. A nodal department should be set up to co-ordinate implementation of social development programmes in the state. This department should be headed by the Financial Commissioner (Social Development). He may be assigned the task of co-ordinating the



implementation of welfare programmes of various departments, while directly administering the departments of Welfare and Social Security and Women Development.

4. A group consisting of medical experts, community medicine professionals and social scientists may be constituted to prepare a plan of action for opening counselling and drug-deaddiction centres.

5. **Monitoring Cell for Authentication of Data**

It is recommended that the government may take necessary steps to ensure accurate recording of suicides particularly in the rural areas. It is also recommended that the government may consider setting up a Monitoring Cell to monitor the cases of suicides in the suicide prone districts (i.e. Sangrur, Bathinda, Firozepur, Mansa, Gurdaspur and Faridkot) of Punjab.

Every accidental death should be properly investigated and recorded by the competent authority with the active assistance of the Kisan Sabhas and Panchayats in the rural areas.

